



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



FRIDAY — 17 DEC 2021

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Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	12/17 Guam becomes new frontline against China
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/guam-americas-forgotten-territory-is-new-front-line-against-china-11639737005
GIST	<p>Alongside a road that cuts through dense jungle, the first new U.S. Marine base in almost 70 years is emerging. Construction cranes are helping build training areas for urban warfare and live-weapons firing behind a perimeter topped with razor wire.</p> <p>Marine Corps Base Camp Blaz, to be formally opened in a ceremony early next year, is the latest sign that Guam, a remote U.S. outpost in the Pacific Ocean, is becoming more crucial for military planners as they sharpen their focus on Asia, and tensions with China rise.</p> <p>U.S. military officials say that the island, already home to Air Force and Navy bases, would be a major staging point for bombers, submarines and troops in any conflict involving the U.S. in the Pacific, including any clash over Taiwan if the U.S. were to become involved.</p> <p>It's also becoming more vulnerable, U.S. officials say, as China expands its military capabilities.</p> <p>Around six years ago, China revealed a new missile, described by U.S. defense analysts as the "Guam Killer," that could reach the Chicago-sized island about 1,500 miles east of the Philippines. Since then, China's stockpile has grown from a few dozen to around 300, according to a recent Pentagon estimate.</p> <p>In a propaganda video last year, China showed a simulated attack on Guam, with dramatic music and slow-motion explosions.</p> <p>China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs referred a request for comment to China's Ministry of National Defense, which didn't respond.</p> <p>U.S. military leaders are seeking hundreds of millions of dollars to add more hardware for Guam to destroy incoming missiles and protect its bases and the roughly 150,000 U.S. civilians there. In its latest review of global resources, the Pentagon highlighted the importance of Guam by pledging to upgrade its air base and other assets on the island.</p> <p>"It will cost money, granted, but the people here are United States citizens. This is sovereign United States territory, and we want to make sure that the people here and in this region are protected," Rear Adm. Ben Nicholson, commander of U.S. forces on Guam and surrounding islands, said.</p> <p>U.S. officials say China's missile threat to Guam is part of a broader surge in Chinese weaponry production that has become one of Washington's top security concerns. The recent annual Pentagon assessment of China's military cited accelerated output of military ships, airplanes and nuclear weapons.</p> <p>This summer, U.S. officials say China tested two hypersonic missiles, including one that fired an additional projectile while close to its target, demonstrating technology no other nation has tested.</p> <p>President Biden has appealed to Chinese President Xi Jinping for arms control talks, although Beijing hasn't made any clear commitments.</p> <p>American military officials and analysts say China wants to deter the U.S. and its allies from operating in the western Pacific by making it more dangerous for them, with the goal of preventing them from intervening in any conflict—including if Beijing follows through on threats to seize Taiwan, a self-ruling island that China claims.</p>

While the U.S. hasn't said whether it would intervene in any attack on Taiwan—part of a “strategic ambiguity” policy aimed at discouraging conflict—many military strategists believe the U.S. might do so.

Other potential trouble spots in the region include the South China Sea, where China has [expanded military operations in disputed areas](#).

Guam would be especially important in any potential conflict in part because Andersen Air Force Base, occupying much of the northern part of the island, is the only U.S. base in the western Pacific capable of hosting heavy bombers for prolonged periods. Submarines leaving Guam's Navy base can quickly dive into deep water to lessen the chances of detection.

The U.S. military also has far more freedom in terms of when and where it can train on Guam than it does at other major U.S. outposts in Asia.

Tokyo has pressed the U.S. for years to reduce its presence in Okinawa, where most of the roughly 50,000 American troops in Japan are stationed, while South Korea, which hosts almost 30,000 U.S. troops, is wary of antagonizing China.

Guam, by contrast, has been controlled by the U.S. since the end of the 19th century, except for a few years when Japan occupied the island after its attack on Pearl Harbor. U.S. Marines retook the island and used it as a major military hub and supply center in the final stages of the war.

Today, its residents are U.S. citizens, though they don't have the right to vote in presidential elections. While the island is mainly known as a tourist destination for Japanese and South Korean honeymooners, just over one-fourth of its land is owned by the U.S. Department of Defense. About 22,000 military personnel are already based there.

“Guam plays a role regardless of where operations might take place or who the adversaries are,” Rear Adm. Nicholson said.

The U.S. has been gradually expanding its presence on Guam over the past decade. In 2013, the U.S. moved a system to shoot down ballistic missiles known as Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense, or Thaad, to Guam after North Korea threatened to fire missiles at the island.

The new Marine base is scheduled to receive the transfer of around 5,000 troops from Okinawa from the middle of the decade, as part of Washington's pledges to draw down troop levels in Japan.

With the expansions, however, come more anxiety about Guam's future.

When Beijing first revealed its Dong Feng-26 missile, which can reach Guam, U.S. officials were confident missile threats to the island could be stopped by Thaad.

“Guam is very well protected,” Gen. John Hyten said in 2017 while head of U.S. strategic command.

In its recent annual assessment of China's military, the Pentagon estimated Beijing's DF-26 missile stockpile had roughly tripled from around 100 in its estimate a year earlier, increasing the risk that China could overwhelm Guam's defenses. It also said for the first time that the missile could possibly be used to deliver low-yield nuclear payloads.

“We are a target. That's how it is,” said Guam Gov. Lou Leon Guerrero. “It's very nerve-racking.”

The U.S. military's goal is to create layers of protection for Guam to stop ballistic missiles that descend from space, and cruise missiles that fly close to the earth's surface on a flat course. The Army recently tested the Israeli-built Iron Dome system on Guam as one option to counter cruise missiles.

	<p>Military leaders say the introduction of something similar to the ship-based Aegis system is needed to provide additional defenses from ballistic missiles, but they haven't settled on a clear proposal.</p> <p>Congress has held off on approving most of the request, saying more clarity is needed in how the money would be spent.</p> <p>Brig. Gen. Mark Holler, U.S. commander of Army missile defense for the Asia-Pacific region, said other existing missile-defense systems such as Patriot batteries in the Pacific region could be moved to Guam overnight in a crisis, but additional capabilities were needed for the island.</p> <p>A core concern is how to ensure any new system is effective against expected advances in Chinese missile threats. Beijing's rapid technical progress has made that more challenging.</p> <p>The Missile Defense Agency has submitted a report on options that is under review by the Pentagon.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/17 Teachers: school violence, mental health
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/17/us/teachers-school-violence-pandemic-burnout-trnd/index.html
GIST	<p>CNN)One schoolteacher says she's been badly injured twice by students. Another says she's so drained at the end of the day she doesn't have the energy to leave her couch.</p> <p>A third has already made the mental calculation that in the event of a school shooting, she'll stay with her special needs students instead of trying to flee to safety.</p> <p>The deadly shooting last month at a high school in Oxford, Michigan, is yet another reminder of the many stresses facing America's educators, who are still struggling with the overwhelming challenges of teaching in a pandemic. Another surge in coronavirus infections — and the looming specter of a return to virtual or hybrid learning — is only adding to teachers' anxiety.</p> <p>"I'm trying to find the joy in my job right now," one teacher told CNN, "because I'm hanging by a thread." CNN recently asked schoolteachers to tell us about their jobs and how they're coping. More than 700 responded, from all corners of the country.</p> <p>Many said this has been the toughest year for teaching they've ever had. They asked CNN to withhold their last names out of fear of retribution.</p> <p>Teachers worry about the threat of shootings at their schools</p> <p>Mass shootings hit close to home for a veteran teacher in Florida who goes by the name Bear.</p> <p>"I had a former student die in Pulse, and I live 20 minutes from Parkland," she said, referring to the 2016 shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando and the 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.</p> <p>Bear teaches at a special needs center and has been through this before. She kept her students calm after the 1999 Columbine shooting and told her class everything would be OK after Sept. 11, 2001. After both tragedies she cried in the parking lot, out of sight of her students, and then came back, ready to help them.</p> <p>"We approach our students when the worst of the worst has happened in the world, and we still stand there in front of them and we're trying to make them feel safe," she said. "But yet, inside we're scared to death too."</p> <p>Video of panicked students jumping out of a classroom window at Oxford High School offers a visceral look at the terror of a school shooting. That video stuck with Bear because she knows she'd never be able to do that with her students, many of whom are in wheelchairs or are non-verbal, she said.</p>

"God forbid, a shooter comes in our building. I'm not running with these kids," she said. "There's no way I'm jumping out the window with a kid in a wheelchair. I'm staying with that kid."

Bear says her wife knows that's what she would do in a shooting. It's just something her family has to live with.

So far in 2021 there have been at least 52 shootings on K-12 school property in the United States, according to a CNN analysis. By comparison there were 37 in all of 2019, the last full year before the pandemic shut down in-person learning at many schools.

Whenever there's news of another school shooting, a rush of adrenaline runs through Angela, a teacher at a small, alternative high school in Washington state.

She tries to stay calm and professional, but she's angry about the loss of lives and how the US hasn't done more to stop violence at schools, she said.

In the wake of each school shooting, Angela said she and her colleagues take stock of their students and their mental health needs. They watch for signs of distress and ask if anyone is being bullied or outcast. There's an extra layer of scrutiny after a shooting, she says.

School shootings and the pandemic -- on top of all the other duties that teachers must juggle each day -- create an underlying layer of stress that does not go away, Angela said.

"Every day it feels like I'm wading through this quicksand that keeps trying to pull me under," she said. "I'm trying to reach the edge, but I can't quite grab it."

Many teachers are struggling to preserve their mental health

If you ask a teacher why they chose a career in education, they'll likely tell you it's for the love of their students or the little moments they hope will have a lasting impact on kids' lives.

But for exhausted teachers in 2021, those ideals can get lost. Emily, a science teacher in Minnesota, said her 11 years in the job have been spent putting students first. But this year, she's exhausted, demoralized and burned out.

Emily said she quit social media and cut back drastically on the amount of work she takes home. With 200 students under her wing, she said the changes were necessary to preserve her mental health.

"I know I'm not doing the best I can right now," she said. "And that's for survival. That's to wake up and be able to put my feet in front of each other."

This year, Emily said she's been essentially serving as a therapist, nurse, counselor and life coach to her students -- on top of teaching them about science.

"If I could explain what teaching is like right now I would say it's like trying to build a house of cards out of a deck of cards but you're outside, and there's 10-mile-an-hour winds and the table you're trying to build on is ... one of the legs is broken, so it's wobbly," she said.

"And you know, the cards are on fire and all the while you've got people yelling at you from the sidelines ... So it just feels like chaos."

But as a teacher, Emily said, it's not in her nature to give up.

Many teachers told CNN they fear they've already reached a point of [mental burnout](#). And it's not just teachers -- pediatricians in the pandemic are seeing record numbers of children with mental health problems, [the president of the American Academy of Pediatrics said Tuesday](#).

Kelly, a special education teacher in New York City, said as much as she'd like to exercise or do things for herself after the school day is over, she doesn't have the energy to leave her couch. She often sits there in silence, "feeling like I have nothing left."

Emily said she sees a lot of people turning to alcohol to cope with their stress. She said that she was too, until one day she realized her drinking was hindering her relationships with her family and how she felt about herself.

If she hadn't quit drinking, Emily said, she didn't think she'd be teaching right now.

And it's not just her mental health that she's worried about. She said she's constantly [reading cues from her students](#) about their well-being when they seem to be struggling emotionally or academically.

"I really do care more about creating problem-solving individuals who are productive members of society than I do about the (schoolwork)," she said. "We live in Minnesota, we're dealing with George Floyd and Daunte Wright. My kids of color, these are conversations they need to have. My White kids need to know. These are really important things to make space for.

"Teaching is putting other people before yourself," she continued, adding that many outside the profession don't understand how much teachers sacrifice for their students. "And I think that's what's the biggest killer is for me right now."

They're seeing more violence at their schools

Dozens of teachers who wrote to CNN said they've been [seeing more violence](#), threats and behavioral problems -- from yelling to physical fights -- in their schools.

Kate, a middle school teacher in Connecticut, said she's been injured twice by students at her school -- so badly that she had to take leave both times.

Kate said she required knee surgery after a rowdy student injured her a couple of years ago. She asked that CNN not reveal how she was injured, for fear of being identified.

"I was just astounded," she said, referring to the knee incident. "I was very angry someone would do this. And there were no consequences, not even an apology" from the student.

Kate said she's seen an uptick in violence in recent years at her school, from students throwing punches to shoving each other down stairs. She said it started before the pandemic, but this year is worse.

"I don't feel safe at school. We have had reports of weapons being brought to our school by students," she said. "I'm hearing students yell at each other, threaten each other, swear at each other. I have heard someone threaten the teacher. ... the verbal abuse is just unbelievable."

Kate said some of her students also don't feel safe.

"I've had multiple students actually come to me as one of their trusted adults and tell me that they do not feel safe in their classrooms," she said. "That's heartbreaking to me."

She said she feels like she can't quit her job, partly out of loyalty to her students but also because "if I leave the teaching profession now, it's going to kill my retirement later."

Henry, a special education teacher at an urban high school in Southern California, said he's seen more violence among students recently and a greater disconnect between students and their studies.

"I just think kids in general are just much more ornery," he said. "They don't want to be in the classroom, they're irritated, their grades are going down the tubes and much like us, they're frustrated with grading, assignments and the start and stop (of in-person schooling in the pandemic)."

Between pandemic protocols and behavioral issues, there is too much going on this year for teachers to handle it well, Henry said.

"I feel our principal and district are trying to support us with every ounce of resource they have but simply do not have the answers to our issues," he wrote. "We are so overwhelmed with questions and answers the only way to cope is to retreat and put one foot in front of the other."

Some teachers are quitting because they've had enough

Kelly thought she'd be teaching for the rest of her life, but after seven years the special education teacher in New York City made a difficult decision to leave the profession next June.

"I just feel like my heart can't take it anymore," she said. "And it feels terrible and I feel this guilt because I feel like I'm letting the kids down or leaving them behind with this decision I'm gonna make. But that's what this system does -- it preys on people with good hearts and who want to help and make a change, and I think that's disgusting."

Kelly said she's been pushed to the point of no return by school administrators who have ignored her concerns and requests for more mental health resources. And that's why she's looking for work outside of education.

Many of her colleagues "fantasize" about quitting, she said.

Kelly isn't alone. Stress, exacerbated by Covid-19, was the most common reason cited in 2020 for why teachers left the profession early, [according to a study by the Rand Corporation](#). And early data suggests [the trend is continuing this year](#) in several parts of the country.

Kelly said teacher burnout typically happens around May or June -- at the end of the school year -- but in 2021 it started for her and other colleagues in September. That, she said, is when she knew it was time to get out.

The pandemic also has been traumatic for teachers as well as students, she said.

"For me, mental health over the years is so important to me now, and it's not worth me emptying my cup -- essentially for people who don't care about me or my students."

Despite it all, many teachers still love what they do

Spend a day in Natalie Stuart's third-grade classroom in Davie, Florida, and you'll wish you were back in elementary school, learning from her yourself.

Early on in the pandemic Stuart downloaded TikTok for fun and it quickly became an integral part of her lesson plans. At a time when students were glued to their technology and social media, Stuart said she knew she needed to meet them where they were.

"If I don't incorporate fun activities, they're not going to be engaged," she said.

Her [TikTok account](#) showcases [Cardi B paper puppets](#), [dance trends](#), references to "[The Office](#)" and dozens of sneak peeks into how she engages with her students.

Stuart's creative teaching style landed her in [Fort Lauderdale Magazine, which named her the city's Best Teacher of 2021](#).

Stuart said she spends about \$1,000 of her own money each year to make sure she has the necessary supplies to pull off her lessons. She used to spend more but cut back to protect her budget. The 34-year-old said she still lives at home with her mom because her salary doesn't cover rent for a one-bedroom apartment.

	<p>Seeing so many of her colleagues quit teaching has been discouraging, she said.</p> <p>"Right now, it's important for good teachers who are staying in the profession to manage their days differently so that they don't get burnt out," she said. "Although that's very easy for me to say, because I'm I'm not gonna lie -- I'm burnt out as well. My only thing is, I'm not going to show that burnout to my students because they don't need it."</p> <p>Stuart said she's begun taking mental health breaks and finding more down time for herself so she can have more energy for her students. To mitigate stress she exercises, meditates, takes homework home no more than twice a week and doesn't check email after 6 p.m.</p> <p>"I go into work every day motivated to make my students happy, to make them laugh, to make them love to learn," Stuart said. "Because at the end of the day, that's why I became a teacher."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/17 British businesses shutting down again
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/17/business/uk-business-omicron/index.html
GIST	<p>London (CNN Business)As the Omicron variant sweeps through the United Kingdom, pushing daily coronavirus infections to their highest level on record, British businesses are shutting their doors again — but not because of government instructions.</p> <p>Restaurants and other venues are instead deciding they have no choice but to close early for Christmas due to a flood of canceled reservations and concerns about the health of staffers.</p> <p>Ferhat Dirik, the co-owner of east London's Mangal 2 restaurant, said he decided to shut a week earlier than planned because of lost bookings and the "general uncertainty in the air."</p> <p>"It's affecting staff morale, and it's affecting us projecting any reasonable income that could justify this," Dirik told CNN Business.</p> <p>The closures are a new threat to the economy and a headache for government, nearly two years into the pandemic. They indicate that when cases are high enough, people are still willing to avoid going out, despite widespread pandemic fatigue. While the government has stopped short of restricting social activity, England's Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty has advised people not to mix with others unless absolutely necessary.</p> <p>But unlike during previous Covid waves, state support for businesses has dwindled, leaving the hospitality industry in the lurch over a crucial period. The lobby group UKHospitality estimates that its members make a quarter of their annual profit over Christmas.</p> <p>"So much rested on this December period for businesses already staggering under a burden of debt incurred from the pandemic and facing rising costs across the board," Kate Nicholls, the head of UKHospitality, said in a statement. "If operators are unable to trade profitably over the next month, many will simply not survive."</p> <p>'Lockdown by stealth' UK finance minister Rishi Sunak on Thursday cut short a trip to the United States because of the deteriorating situation back home.</p> <p>"I understand the concerns of businesses at the moment given everything that's going on. That's why I've been in touch with hospitality industry leaders today, my team hosting roundtables and talking to them," he told CNN's Richard Quest. But Sunak offered no hint of support for the hospitality industry beyond existing measures such as reduced rates of sales and local business taxes.</p>

"I think it's important to recognize, as the prime minister said earlier today, that the situation is very different to what we've done and encountered before. The government is not telling people to cancel things. It's not closing down businesses," Sunak added.

The timing is making matters worse for everyone. People who had planned dinners or drinks out are now bailing because they don't want to risk spending Christmas sick or in isolation, instead of with their families.

According to reservation data from OpenTable, UK bookings plunged 24% on Tuesday and 22% on Wednesday compared to 2019. Globally, bookings fell 18% and 15%, respectively.

Staff who work in hospitality are similarly concerned about rising levels of infections among colleagues. "The main reason was the team. We didn't want anyone else to get sick," said Bash Redford, the co-owner of south London's Forza Wine.

He said that on Sunday evening, two people had coronavirus on his team of 31. By Wednesday morning, eight had contracted it — and Redford decided it was necessary to limit risks for the rest of the staff. Forza Wine announced it would close from Wednesday through Christmas.

Restaurants aren't the only ones facing a crunch. In a statement Thursday, the Society of London Theatre warned of a "challenging situation" across the country.

"While ticket sales remain strong for the Christmas period, show cancellations due to cast and crew illness — compounded by Covid-related audience refund and exchange requests — is creating an increasingly bleak outlook for venues over the next few crucial weeks," the industry group said.

The United Kingdom reported an all-time high of 88,376 coronavirus cases on Thursday, as public health officials warn that cases of the Delta variant are "remaining relatively stable in number" while Omicron "is increasing very rapidly." In London, it's already the dominant strain.

So far, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has avoided rolling out more severe restrictions, instead encouraging people to work from home when possible, mandating masks and requiring proof of vaccination or a negative Covid-19 test to enter clubs and large sporting events.

Johnson, whose party has just suffered a [shock midterm election defeat](#), said Thursday that rather than "locking stuff down" the UK government is asking people to "be cautious" and "think about their activities in the run up to Christmas."

But he faces criticism from the hospitality industry that this approach amounts to imposing a ["lockdown by stealth"](#) — this time without any financial support.

"It's another massive hit on the industry by sending these mixed signals — by telling people not to dine out but also offering no assurances for businesses," Mangal 2's Dirik said.

Another economic hit

Paul Donovan, chief economist at UBS Global Wealth Management, said this "voluntary collapse in entertainment and services" ahead of Christmas could have a major effect on the economic recovery, which was already [stalling as inflation surges](#). The United Kingdom's gross domestic product grew by just 0.1% in October, with output still 0.5% below its pre-pandemic level.

"There is no government assistance this time, so there is an impact," Donovan said.

One big question in the near term is whether restaurants that decide to shut earlier than planned will still pay staff. If not, workers will "suddenly get an income drop," Donovan said.

	<p>Mangal 2 is still "looking at the options" as it weighs "what's morally right as well as financially viable." Redford said Forza Wine's staff will be paid this month, and there's enough cash on hand to ensure they'll also be paid in January and February. After that, though, the outlook gets murky.</p> <p>Ultimately, the magnitude of the economic hit will depend in large part on how long people focus their spending at home instead of on activities such as dining out, Donovan said. That will depend both on the steps the government takes and the course of the virus.</p> <p>The good news, he said, is that businesses have gone through this before, and have processes for selling food to-go and delivering meal kits. If they need to go this route again, restaurants and pubs will have lower set-up costs.</p> <p>But for now — with coronavirus cases skyrocketing, and another holiday season spoiled by the pandemic — the mood is grim.</p> <p>"People are really scared," said Redford, who had been planning to open two new locations in 2022. "Like really, really scared."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Sawant printed ballots, pop up voting edge
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/politics/king-county-elections-chief-printed-ballots-kshama-sawant-recall-election-improve-access/281-043c5744-8d75-4c94-8de2-b95fe1bb5c8b
GIST	<p>RENTON, Wash. — Seattle Council Member Kshama Sawant will survive a recall attempt and simultaneously bring new light on what ultimately was an effective and legal method of securing votes.</p> <p>After final ballots were checked for authenticity today, King County Elections says 20,646, or 50.37% of voters in District 3 voted against recalling Sawant, just 306 more votes than the 20,340 or 49.63% of people who voted to recall the politically polarizing city council member.</p> <p>There is no automatic recount for a recall election, and it will be certified on Friday.</p> <p>Recall Sawant Chair Henry Bridger said his campaign will not challenge the results.</p> <p>"It puts her on notice and rest of council on notice that we won't tolerate this," said Bridger.</p> <p>He led the effort to recall the three-term council member based on three charges that she violated her oath of office, including using public funds for an initiative campaign, violating public health guidelines with a city hall rally, and leading marchers to Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan's home violating state privacy laws.</p> <p>It is fair to say that Sawant and her supporters conducted one of the better election ground games in recent memory, by utilizing a system that most voters don't know about.</p> <p>"It is legal," said King County Elections Chief Julie Wise, unequivocally, about the pop-up voting sites that Sawant supporters created around Seattle's Capitol Hill.</p> <p>"We heard this election from about 100 voters that were concerned and I think frustrated," she said in reference to the tents where people were printing ballots to be used in the recall.</p> <p>"That's a program that we've offered our voters for over a decade now. Since 2010, voters have been able to go online and access their ballots," said Wise, who believes the print-at-home option enhances access to voting.</p> <p>Wise said the online platform allows registered voters to replace their ballots, and print at home, putting the ballot in a postage-paid envelope. She said the ballots are held to the same strict standard and verification as ones mailed out by the elections department.</p>

In this particular election, 3% or 1,400 ballots were printed. Wise said the normal rate during an election is one half of one percent. It is highly likely, given the small margin, that those ballots printed at pro-Sawant locations were the difference in the race.

Secretary of State spokesperson Kylee Zabel said the print-at-home option is legal statewide and related to the U.S. Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act (or MOVE Act) of 2010, which “required states to allow military and overseas voters to obtain their ballot electronically and print it out online.”

Bridger, and others, have raised questions about whether the tactic violated state electioneering laws, saying it needs to be fixed, though they won't contest the final results.

"We're not going to challenge it, and we're going to leave it alone," he said.

A statement from Secretary of State Steve Hobbs suggests that his office has paid attention to the complaints in Seattle.

"State law prohibits 'election officers' from electioneering at any 'voting center or ballot drop location,'" he wrote. "Any election officer who does any electioneering at a voting center or ballot drop location during the voting period that begins 18 days before and ends the day of a special election, general election, or primary is guilty of a misdemeanor, and upon conviction must be fined in any sum not exceeding one hundred dollars and pay the costs of prosecution. Since this activity occurred during a local recall election, enforcement of this law would fall to the city police or the county sheriff, then to followed up on by the city attorney or county prosecuting attorney. Whether this activity is legal would be something for the courts to ultimately determine."

Wise said there is no violation.

"At that those booths we didn't see any King County Election signs, we didn't see them impersonating that they were the elections department," she said, noting that the sites were clear campaign locations.

In fact, she says she wishes more people knew about the program.

"It's a really important access piece," she told KING5, "It certainly means and warrants further conversation. I'd look forward to doing that with auditors across the state and legislators this session to see if we need to be changing our laws at all. But what I want to be very careful about is that we don't limit folks that need access to online ballot."

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HEADLINE	12/16 Flu resurging while Covid raging: twindemic
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/flu-season-making-resurgence-while-covid-19-raging/OHAKQTZV6BHQJHBO37SMMERANM/
GIST	<p>As we head into the official start of winter, local health officials are worried we might be headed for a dangerous double whammy, the flu, which is making a resurgence amid COVID-19.</p> <p>KIRO 7 spoke with some local doctors about what might be ahead, who said a person can get the flu and COVID-19 at the same time.</p> <p>KIRO 7 found out that flu cases across the country are rising, doubling in the last week alone as COVID-19 cases have nearly doubled too.</p> <p>Health experts described the current crisis as a “twindemic.”</p> <p>Where COVID-19 and the flu collide, infection rates soar.</p>

“You would imagine that your chance of hospitalization, your chance of severe illness, your chances of death is going to be higher if you’re carrying both at the same time,” said Dr. Elizabeth Wako, the chief medical officer for Swedish Hospital of Seattle.

Last year, flu levels were almost nonexistent, but that is not the case this season.

KIRO 7 was told by some doctors that it will be hard for people to determine if they actually have the flu or if they have COVID-19.

“In addition, the symptoms are the same. You’re not going to be able to tell when you get sick, whether you’re sick from COVID, whether you’re sick from delta, whether you’re sick from omicron, whether you’re sick from the flu,” Wako said.

However, some hospitals tell KIRO 7 that the situation is largely under control. Hospital admissions have not spiked in western Washington yet.

According to current estimates, both COVID-19 and the flu possibly could start having an impact in our area in late January or February.

And medical workers in our area are not taking anything lightly as plans are in place at Swedish to regroup certain nurses and doctors to ICU units should things get out of control, according to Dr. Wako.

“We do have a great network of communications, so we’re able to transport patients back and for and I think that helps us. Washington state has that I think that better than other states do.”

Wako stresses that it is fine for people to get both their COVID and flu shots at the same time.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Threatening graffiti closes Bothell HS
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/bothell-high-school-close-friday-due-threatening-graffiti-found-campus/VD2Y3KUWZZAI5LAIQ7345E36HM/
GIST	<p>In a letter from the Northshore School District sent to families, Bothell High School will be closed Friday following the discovery of threatening graffiti on campus, which threatened violence to the entire school community.</p> <p>Superintendent Michell Reid said Bothell police were notified and they are working with school officials to identify the source of the threat.</p> <p>“I have decided to close the Bothell High School campus on Friday, Dec. 17, out of an abundance of caution. Instead, classes will be held via Zoom,” Reid said in the letter.</p> <p>The letter stated that “There will be consequences.”</p> <p>This is not the first incident for the high school, which was closed in early December due to a safety concern. The school had received an anonymous “threat of violence.”</p> <p>This current incident also follows posts on TikTok warning of shootings and bomb threats at schools nationwide on Friday.</p> <p>Officials said those threats were not credible and assured parents that security would be tightened, The Associated Press reported.</p> <p>In a statement posted to its Twitter account, TikTok’s communications team said, “We handle even rumored threats with utmost seriousness, which is why we’re working with law enforcement to look into</p>

	<p>warnings about potential violence at schools even though we have not found evidence of such threats originating or spreading via TikTok.”</p> <p>On Friday, many schools across the region will be taking the precautions necessary to keep students and staff safe.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Workers sue tornado-hit candle factory
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/kentucky-tornadoes-lawsuit-mayfield-b5a0eb5dd10083f333921f4892b2f35a
GIST	<p>MAYFIELD, Ky. (AP) — Survivors of a tornado that leveled a Kentucky candle factory, killing eight workers, have filed a lawsuit claiming their employer demonstrated “flagrant indifference” by refusing to allow employees to go home early as the storm approached.</p> <p>As legal fallout from the catastrophic weather started surfacing, steady rainfall added to the survivors’ misery. As they picked through what remained of their homes, roofers patched holes and cleanup crews removed massive piles of downed trees and other debris. Storm-stricken parts of western Kentucky could get up to 2 inches (5 centimeters) of rain by Sunday, officials said.</p> <p>“It’s not right for the people who have had their homes knocked down, that are trying to salvage it, are now having all this rain on top of it,” Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said Thursday.</p> <p>The lawsuit, filed in state court late Wednesday, accuses the Mayfield Consumer Products candle production company of violating Kentucky occupational safety and health workplace standards by keeping its staff at work despite the danger of death and injury. The lawsuit claims that workers were threatened with termination if they left in the hours before the tornado hit. The suit seeks compensatory and punitive damages.</p> <p>“It’s a straightforward claim, exactly what this statute was meant to address,” Amos Jones, a Washington, D.C.-based attorney representing employees, said by phone Thursday.</p> <p>Bob Ferguson, speaking on behalf of the company located in the western Kentucky town of Mayfield, previously insisted that employees were free to leave anytime, and he denied that they would have faced retribution if they left the factory. Ferguson did not immediately return phone calls seeking comment Thursday.</p> <p>The company’s CEO, Troy Propes, said in a statement Wednesday that the company was retaining “an independent expert team” to review the actions of managers and employees leading up to when the tornado struck the factory.</p> <p>“We’re confident that our team leaders acted entirely appropriately and were, in fact, heroic in their efforts to shelter our employees,” Propes said. “We are hearing accounts from a few employees that our procedures were not followed. We’re going to do a thorough review of what happened.”</p> <p>The lawsuit claims the factory had “up to three and half hours before the tornado hit its place of business to allow its employees to leave its worksite as safety precautions.” The factory showed “flagrant indifference to the rights” of the workers by refusing to do so, the lawsuit said.</p> <p>Factory employee Haley Conder told The Associated Press on Tuesday that a supervisor threatened her with written disciplinary action if she went home early because storms were approaching.</p> <p>Conder questioned why the company did not encourage workers to go home — or at least give them a better understanding of the danger — between a first tornado siren around 6 p.m. Friday and another one around 9 p.m., shortly before the tornado hit.</p>

	<p>The only plaintiff identified in the lawsuit is Elijah Johnson, who was working the night shift at the candle factory when the storm struck. The wording of the lawsuit says it was filed by Johnson and on behalf of “others similarly situated.” Others aren’t identified by name for “fear of reprisal,” Jones said.</p> <p>After days of not knowing how many workers died at the factory, authorities are now “pretty close to certainty” that no more than eight perished, Beshear said Thursday.</p> <p>The governor said it was “an absolute miracle” that more lives were not lost. “I will tell you, I was almost certain that the number would be 70,” he said. “But thank God, others either left or escaped.”</p> <p>More than 100 people were working on candle orders when the twister flattened the facility. The company later said many employees who survived left the site and went to homes with no phone service, adding to the confusion over who was missing.</p> <p>The lawsuit was filed less than a week after the storms that began Friday night destroyed lives and property from Arkansas to Illinois and in parts of neighboring states, carving a more than 200-mile (320-kilometer) path through Kentucky alone.</p> <p>Beshear has said that Kentucky’s workplace safety agency would look into the eight deaths. That kind of investigation is routine whenever workers are killed on the job.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Flu vaccine no match to circulating strain
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/16/health/flu-vaccine-mismatch/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)One of the main circulating influenza viruses has changed and the current flu vaccines don't match it well any more -- an indication they may not do much to prevent infection, researchers reported Thursday. But they are still likely to prevent severe illness.</p> <p>"From our lab-based studies it looks like a major mismatch," Scott Hensley, a professor of microbiology at the University of Pennsylvania who led the study, told CNN.</p> <p>It's bad news for the vaccine, he said. Influenza vaccines protect against four different strains of the flu: H3N2, H1N1 and two strains of influenza B. Hensley's study only covers H3N2, but that happens to be the main circulating strain.</p> <p>The vaccine mismatch may help explain an outbreak of flu at the University of Michigan last month that affected more than 700 people. More than 26% of those who tested positive had been vaccinated against flu -- the same percentage as those who tested negative. That indicates the vaccine was not effective in preventing infection.</p> <p>It's what flu viruses do, Hensley said. "We have been monitoring this virus for several months," he said. Flu viruses mutate all the time—far more than other viruses, including the coronavirus. And different variations can circulate at the same time. But this version of H3N2 has changes that help it escape the antibodies the body makes in response to vaccines.</p> <p>Antibodies are the first line of defense against invaders like viruses, and the current vaccine doesn't seem to generate any of the right antibodies against this new, mutated version of H3N2, called 2a2 for short.</p> <p>Luckily, the changes are unlikely to affect the second line of defense offered by immune system -- cells called T-cells, so even f the vaccines don't protect against infection, they are likely to protect people against severe disease and death, Hensley said.</p> <p>"Studies have clearly shown that seasonal influenza vaccines consistently prevent hospitalizations and deaths even in years where there are large antigenic mismatches," Hensley and colleagues wrote in a report posted online as a pre-print. It's not published in a peer reviewed journal.</p>

"Influenza vaccinations will be crucial for reducing hospitalizations as SARS-CoV-2 and 2a2 H3N2 viruses co-circulate in the coming months."

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has said influenza virtually disappeared last year, but it's coming back this year. The big fear is a "double whammy" of flu and Covid-19.

"Population immunity against influenza viruses is likely low since these viruses have not circulated widely during the COVID-19 pandemic," Hensley's team wrote.

"Social distancing, mask wearing, and decreases in international travel have likely contributed to reduced global circulation of influenza viruses. Once COVID-19-related restrictions are eased or lifted, it is possible that influenza viruses will circulate widely due to lack of infection-induced population immunity over the past two years."

Flu vaccine efficacy changes from year to year. Part of the problem is the lead time needed to make influenza vaccines. Most are made using old technology that requires the use of chicken eggs incubated for weeks. So vaccine strains are chosen six months ahead of when the vaccines will be delivered.

The virus can evolve in that time, or different strains can come to dominate, and that appears to have happened this year, Hensley said. In years that the vaccine doesn't match the circulating viruses well, vaccine effectiveness plummets -- sometimes to as low as 6%, as overall effectiveness was against H3N2 flu in the 2014-2015 flu season, according to the CDC.

The changes in the H3N2 virus this year are reminiscent of the mutations that rendered the vaccine so weak in 2014-2015, Hensley said.

Things can still change, the researchers noted.

"While cases of 2a2 H3N2 infections are quickly rising in the United States and other parts of the world, it is possible that other clades of H3N2 will become predominant in the future," they wrote.

"It is also possible that H1N1 or influenza B viruses might dominate later in the 2021-2022 season." It's not yet clear how well the vaccines might match those strains.

According to the CDC, influenza kills anywhere between 12,000 and 52,000 people a year, depending on the flu season, and puts as many as 700,000 people into the hospital.

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HEADLINE	12/16 School shooting threats prompt closures
SOURCE	https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-16/tiktok-school-shooting-threats-prompt-closures-and-more-police
GIST	<p>A wave of school shooting threats in the U.S. circulating on TikTok and other social media is raising concern among school staff and authorities.</p> <p>Generally the threats don't name specific schools and local authorities have said many of them lack credibility. Still, schools in Michigan, Washington and others across the country have temporarily closed or bolstered police presence as a precaution.</p> <p>There have been nine active and 235 non-active shooter incidents at schools so far this year, according to the Center for Homeland Defense and Security, and school districts say they take each warning seriously.</p> <p>New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy tweeted that while there are "no known specific threats" against schools in the state, he has spoken about the viral posts with the state's attorney general, the head of the state police and the acting director of the state's Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness.</p>

“We will work closely with law enforcement to monitor the situation and remain prepared,” Murphy tweeted.

Oxford Community Schools in Michigan, where a shooter killed four students after an attack in late November, closed all buildings district-wide due to a new shooting threat. Seattle police opened investigations into two schools Wednesday morning and closed one school after staff alerted authorities to social media posts warning of shootings, according to a press [release](#).

Tooele County, Utah, officials said they believe the trend originated on TikTok as a way for students to skip school. They said it had spread to other internet platforms like Instagram and Facebook “and has morphed into something much more disturbing,” in a [statement](#) Wednesday.

In Glenview, Illinois, a Chicago suburb, police deemed shooting and bomb threats circulating on social media not credible, according to a news release on the department’s Facebook [page](#).

Ashley Gonzalez, police chief for the Austin Independent School District, sent a letter to the community alerting of a “non-specific” school shooting threat on Dec. 17.

“These threats in no way mention any Austin ISD school and are believed to be part of a nationwide trend,” Gonzalez said, who is planning to bolster security measures in schools Friday. “Unfortunately, we’ve seen a trend of reposting messages that have no relation to our city, area or schools and many of the threats end up being hoaxes.”

TikTok, owned by ByteDance Ltd., tweeted a statement saying it was working with law enforcement. “We handle even rumored threats with utmost seriousness, which is why we’re working with law enforcement to look into warnings about potential violence at schools,” the company said in a statement.

The [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#), said it takes all potential threats seriously. “We regularly work with our law enforcement partners to determine the credibility of any threats,” the agency said in a statement.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Seattle public schools tracking threats
SOURCE	https://westseattleblog.com/2021/12/seattle-public-schools-spd-say-theyre-tracking-nationwide-threat-concerns/
GIST	<p>We’re getting questions tonight about what’s described as a nationwide situation with social-media-driven concerns about school threats. So far the parents from whom we’ve heard say Seattle Public Schools hasn’t sent any direct communication to families. The district did publish this on Twitter earlier this evening:</p> <p>National coverage we’ve found (such as this story) underscores that the rumors have not been found to be credible. But some districts have decided to take precautionary action anyway, such as Tacoma, which plans to start the day in lockdown. Even before this – several days ago – SPS superintendent Dr. Brent Jones sent this video message about a recent increase in threats (thanks to the reader who shared the link).</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 KCSO: no credible threats county schools
SOURCE	https://patch.com/washington/seattle/no-credible-threats-king-county-schools-sheriffs-office-says
GIST	<p>KING COUNTY, WA — As rumors of potential school violence swirl nationwide, the King County Sheriff’s Office said on Thursday that it had no evidence of credible threats to local schools. Sergeant Tim Meyer, a sheriff’s office spokesman, said in a news release that law enforcement was working closely with schools to ensure any potential threats were addressed.</p>

	<p>"We are aware that this week, both locally and elsewhere, unsubstantiated social media content has caused some families concern for the wellbeing of their children," Meyer said. "The King County Sheriff's Office wants to assure everyone in our community that we, in collaboration with school districts and regional partners, will remain vigilant in assessing online comments and holding those accountable who seek to harm and disrupt our schools."</p> <p>Law enforcement agencies and school districts across the country publicized a rumored TikTok challenge, which purportedly encouraged students to threaten gun violence on Friday.</p> <p>Meyer said he was unaware of any specific or credible threats locally, but encouraged school officials to report any concerns they find.</p> <p>"We thank school officials for their continued vigilance and ask them to dial 911 to report concerning events or behavior," Meyer said. "Any new and credible information will be shared to ensure the safety of all who call King County home."</p> <p>Seattle Public Schools canceled classes at Franklin High School on Wednesday, citing a social media threat being investigated by the Seattle Police Department. The school remained closed Thursday, due to "an unexpected shortage of critical teaching staff," the district said.</p> <p>In Snohomish County, Lynnwood police arrested a 15-year-old boy Thursday, accused of bringing a pistol and ammunition to Meadowdale High School.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Western WA schools on alert
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/viral-social-media-post-puts-western-washington-schools-alert/YUNV6CJNYVH6DNWPVSLXAVIFD4/
GIST	<p>A viral social media post has school districts heightening security Friday.</p> <p>The threat is calling for a national day of violence in the classroom.</p> <p>While local law enforcement agencies say there is no credible threat in Western Washington, they are still monitoring schools across the area.</p> <p>Seattle Public Schools says it is monitoring the situation, Tacoma Public Schools is going into a modified lockdown for the day, and Northshore schools have asked for a strong police presence.</p> <p>"Threats should be taken seriously, even if it's not a local threat," says parent Kayla Epting. Her daughter is a junior at Garfield High School in Seattle, where she serves on the PTSA.</p> <p>Together with other community leaders, she held a meeting Thursday night to discuss the increased number of threats across the sound.</p> <p>Some of those threats include a recent shooting near Garfield High School in Seattle where just weeks prior, a bomb threat had forced the campus to be evacuated.</p> <p>Bothell High School canceled classes for this Friday after a threatening message was found on campus. It's the second this month the school has closed due to safety concerns.</p> <p>Ferndale High School was locked down after a threatening post was found on social media and a 13-year-old was arrested for threatening to shoot students at Whitman Middle School in Seattle.</p> <p>"We are trying to do everything we can to make sure that you're kids are safe," says Seattle Police Chief Adrian Diaz. "We've actually made some arrests in them, investigated some of them, but we're also making sure there's a visible presence from the schools as well."</p>

	<p>In the meantime, some district leaders are hoping it's not lost on parents that these threats can take a toll on their kids. School board members added that Seattle Public Schools needs to do better at making sure students have the mental health support they need.</p> <p>"They're struggling," says SPS board member Michelle Sarju. "They're struggling in ways we've never seen."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Wenatchee SD working w/terrorism unit
SOURCE	https://www.kpq.com/wenatchee-school-district-working-with-statewide-terrorism-unit-over-tiktok-school-threat-for-friday/
GIST	<p>The Statewide Terrorism Intelligence Center has been in contact with the Wenatchee School District over a post that has been shared widely this week over TikTok.</p> <p>According to the district, the post refers to a threat to school safety "for every school in the USA, even elementary," on Friday, December 17th that is not thought to be credible. The post did not originate in the Wenatchee School District and other districts are reportedly dealing with the same post.</p> <p>The Wenatchee Police Department has been in contact with the school district and may provide an increased presence in some of the district's buildings Friday as a precaution.</p> <p>Parents are being told that if they or their child become aware of any potential threat posted to social media or anywhere else, please notify a school staff member or trusted adult right away.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Understanding omicron's many mutations
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/16/omicron-variant-mutations-covid/
GIST	<p>The omicron variant of the coronavirus has about 50 genetic mutations, and a whopping 36 of them are in the all-important spike. That is the part that lets the virus attach to human cells and worm its way inside.</p> <p>Those spikes play a critical role in the biggest unknowns about this new variant: How easily will omicron pass from person to person? How sick will it make us? And how well will our vaccines and immune systems protect us from it?</p> <p>Scientists are just beginning to untangle omicron's mysteries, but the locations of mutations in key parts of the spike provide some clues.</p> <p>A look at the spike</p> <p>Every spike on a coronavirus's surface is made of three identical proteins twisted together, making it look a little like a head of broccoli with three stalks.</p> <p>Each stalk has three vital regions — the receptor binding domain (RBD), the N-terminal domain (NTD) and the furin cleavage site (FCS) — and most of omicron's mutations are in these three areas.</p> <p>The spike's genomic sequence takes up a small portion of the virus's full genome — about 1,270 of its 10,000 coded amino acids. Each part of the spike's structure is created using a specific section of code.</p> <p>Mutations are changes to amino acids within the genome. If mutations change the virus enough, it becomes a new variant. D614G, an early mutation to the original strain, is now present in all the most concerning variants.</p> <p>A mutation is identified by its position in the genetic code and the amino acids that were switched there. In this case, aspartic acid (D) was swapped for glycine (G) at position 614.</p>

A key to transmissibility: the receptor binding domain

Amino acids in this area attach to a cell's receptor like a key in a lock, opening the cell so the virus can enter.

When scientists first peered at omicron's genetic code, they knew that some of the 15 mutations in this area of the spike would make the virus's connection to the cell stronger, and they feared that others might strengthen it even more. A tightened connection would allow omicron to spread more easily than its predecessors.

Early data bears that out: Omicron is [rapidly spreading](#) in many places, and various models indicate that it may be two to three times more transmissible than the delta variant, which continues to [surge through the United States](#) and much of the world.

"There's no question that this will be more transmissible than delta," said Mark Zeller, a staff scientist at Scripps Research whose team sequences viruses.

Part of the problem is that in addition to being the location where the virus binds to cells, the domain is ground zero in our immune system's attack on the virus.

Specialized fighting forces called neutralizing antibodies try to latch on here to block the spike from attaching to cell receptors. (Monoclonal antibody treatments are an example of neutralizing antibodies.)

Those antibodies developed to attack the spikes of a previous version of the virus, which were largely similar to each other. Antibodies may find it more difficult to attach to the vastly different omicron spike.

Notable mutations in this area

If the receptor binding domain were a catcher's mitt, 10 mutations are right in the pocket. Amino acids in this sweet spot interact most directly with the cell's receptors.

One of these mutations is N501Y, which omicron shares with the alpha, beta and gamma variants. It helps the virus cling more tightly to cell receptors and muscle out antibodies. How it will work in concert with omicron's many new mutations around it is not yet known.

Beta and gamma share the E484K mutation, which appears to thwart certain neutralizing antibodies by changing the shape of their target. Omicron has a different amino acid in that spot, and it has changed other immune system targets as well. So the question is whether, and how well, antibodies will still recognize the enemy. Fortunately, at least one type of monoclonal antibody called [sotrovimab](#) does not seem fooled by the new variant.

A key to immunity: the N-terminal domain

Scientists are not sure exactly what this area's function is, said Tulane microbiologist Robert F. Garry, an expert on the virus's anatomy. It may help viruses attach to cells in some way.

But it is clear that antibodies — both the kind triggered by vaccines and the kind triggered by previous infection — target this area.

Notable mutations in this area

In omicron, the N-terminal domain has been extensively overhauled, said Zeller. Four amino acids were swapped out, six total were deleted from three locations and three new ones were added together in one spot.

Scientists suspect this extensive remodeling means antibodies will bind less efficiently, so they will be less effective at stopping the virus from infecting new cells.

The [first lab study of omicron](#) indicated that it may indeed evade quite a bit of antibody protection. Early data also shows that people who received boosters on top of full vaccination [still remain largely protected](#) from the most severe effects of covid, although it will vary greatly from person to person.

A key to severe illness: the furin cleavage site

Once inside a cell, the coronavirus causes an infection by turning the cell's machinery into a tiny factory that churns out new copies of the virus.

As new viruses leave the factory, the human enzyme furin acts like a trigger, activating them by snipping their spikes as they head out the door. The place on the spike's stalk where that snip occurs is called the furin cleavage site.

What happens after that snip is complicated and involves the loose ends helping to fuse cell membranes together. But the upshot is that the virus is able to slip more easily from one cell to the next without exposing itself to antibodies.

Not all viruses have furin cleavage sites, but ones that do can often spread more easily into a wider range of tissues, Garry said. It is probably one of the major reasons SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes covid, is able to penetrate so deeply into the lungs and make some people extremely sick.

Notable mutations in this area

A cluster of mutations near the furin cleavage site may let omicron more easily slide into cells.

Garry said alpha beefed up its site over the original virus's, and delta's site is better than alpha's. Many studies have pegged the mutation at position 681 as a reason delta spreads so efficiently.

Omicron's mutation at that position is identical to alpha's, not delta's, which would appear to be a step backward. However, omicron has two unique mutations nearby. No one knows whether the combination of the three will make omicron's site better, worse, or about the same as delta's.

Early data suggests omicron may cause milder illness than delta in most people — an enormous silver lining in the dark cloud of a more highly transmissible variant.

Not every mutation improves a virus. In fact, most either harm the virus or have little effect. But a new variant does not begin to elbow out others unless some mutation or combination of them makes it superior to its predecessors, Garry said. "It's either making the virus replicate better, transmit better or resist the immune system better."

So far, he said, omicron appears to be at least two for three.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Executions, death sentences historic lows
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/12/16/death-penalty-down/
GIST	<p>In 1999, 279 people were sentenced to death in the United States, and 98 prisoners were executed. That year saw the most executions since capital punishment was reinstated in 1976.</p> <p>Things have changed.</p> <p>In 2021, the number of people sentenced to death was down to 18, and the number of prisoners executed this year was 11. The number of executions was the fewest since 1988, and the number of death sentences equals last year's total for the fewest in the modern era of the death penalty.</p> <p>And when Virginia outlawed the death penalty in March, after having executed more prisoners than any other state, it created a majority of 26 states that have either banned capital punishment or imposed a moratorium on its use, according to statistics released Thursday by the Death Penalty Information Center.</p>

The numbers marked a continuing decline in America's desire to execute convicted murderers. A Gallup poll from earlier this year found public support for the death penalty at a 50-year low. Although 80 percent of those surveyed in 1994 supported capital punishment, this year only 54 percent said they were "in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder."

"There's a consistent national trend moving away from the death penalty," said Robert Dunham, the center's executive director. He cited two major factors: "There's been a paradigm shift about punishment in general, a social shift away from excessive punishment, and there's been this growing awareness about flaws with the death penalty, in particular," whether it's the wrongful conviction of defendants, the racial disparities in its use or the high cost of the trial and appeals process.

New research by the center found that 186 prisoners since 1973 have been exonerated after being sentenced to die. "We now know for every 8.3 executions, there's an exoneration," Dunham said. "That's an appalling failure rate. If we read that about any other public policy, it would not be tolerated."

Dunham added: "It is now unquestionably true that people who were innocent have been executed, and their innocence has never been discovered."

The center found that the death penalty is becoming geographically isolated, with just three states — Alabama, Oklahoma and Texas — accounting for a majority of both death sentences and executions last year. In 2021, Texas and the federal government — which executed 13 prisoners during the last six months of the Trump administration — both performed three executions, while Oklahoma had two and Missouri, Alabama and Mississippi each had one. There were no executions west of Texas for a seventh straight year.

In Virginia, the first Southern state to abolish the death penalty, and Utah, where a bipartisan bill to abolish will be considered next year, Dunham said that "one of the big developments in both of those states was a combination of prosecutors supporting abolition as well as family members of murder victims." In Virginia, the daughter of a slain sheriff's deputy told lawmakers that family members are retraumatized by the appeals process and do not experience solace when an execution takes place, as it did for the killer of Cpl. Eric Sutphin.

Daughter of slain sheriff's deputy asks Va. governor to stop execution of her father's killer

"We are seeing more and more family members saying that," Dunham said, "and more and more prosecutors listening."

There was continued evidence of racial disparity in capital punishment, the center's report found. Of the 18 people sentenced to death this year, six were Black and four were Latino. The race of the victim seemed relevant, too, the report found: 14 of the 18 cases involved White victims, and no White person was sentenced to death for any murder that did not involve at least one White victim.

Since 1976, 55 percent of those executed have been White, 34 percent Black and 8.4 percent Hispanic, while 75 percent of the victims have been White, compared with 16 percent who were Black and 7 percent who were Hispanic.

Intellectual impairment was also an issue. The center found that of the 11 people executed in 2021, 10 of them had one or more significant impairments, including mental illness, brain injury, intellectual disability or chronic serious childhood trauma.

Dunham revealed another finding by the center: About half of the people on death row in the United States were sent there by about 1.2 percent of the counties in the United States.

"What the numbers tell us," Dunham said, "is the rate at which death sentences are imposed has nothing to do with murder rates and nothing to do with the severity of murders in a location. It has everything to do

with who is making the decision about whether to pursue the death penalty. So one of the biggest contributors to the decline in these outlier, aggressive counties is reform prosecutors.”

Prosecutors in Philadelphia, Los Angeles and other big jurisdictions have declared that they will no longer seek capital punishment.

Four counties in Texas — Harris, Dallas, Tarrant and Bexar — and Oklahoma County in Oklahoma have accounted for 20 percent of all executions since 1976. Oklahoma County, where Oklahoma City is located, has carried out 42 executions, more than twice as many as St. Louis County, Mo., with the next-highest total.

“That tells us these are clear outliers,” Dunham said. “It also tells us how much these outliers distort the system.”

The move for social justice — particularly after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis and as awareness of racial imbalance in the justice system has grown — has combined with citizens watching states such as South Carolina and Arizona that continue to push for executions even as state courts have prevented them, Dunham said.

In South Carolina, prosecutors twice tried to schedule executions without first obtaining the execution drugs, and prosecutors in Arizona tried to speed up the appeals process to execute prisoners before the drugs expired.

“It’s this kind of extreme conduct,” Dunham said, “that is having long-term effects on the public’s view of the death penalty. Even if people support the death penalty in the abstract, they are losing faith in the ability to carry it out properly.”

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HEADLINE	12/16 Pushing states not to build new highways
SOURCE	https://www.wired.com/story/us-gently-discouraging-states-building-new-highways/
GIST	<p>HIGHWAYS ARE NOT great for the planet. Their smooth, wide, inviting lanes have helped make transportation the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in the US, responsible for 29 percent of the total. With prodding from the Biden administration, major US automakers have pledged that 40 percent of their sales will be powered by plugs, not gas, by 2030. But even if the country hits that target, highways will still enable and encourage sprawl, and more emissions.</p> <p>Which is why environmentalists were frustrated when the \$1.3 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill passed this year. In the end, the legislation mostly preserved the status quo, allocating 80 percent of transportation funding to highways and 20 percent to transit. Some of that money will be distributed through competitive grants, meaning the US Transportation Department will play a role—more than in past years—in deciding which projects are funded. In those cases, the department can choose to prioritize climate-friendly builds where it wishes.</p> <p>But most of the transportation funding will be distributed over the next five years to states, based on population. Then state and local officials will decide what to do with it. They can use some of the money to adapt to or prevent climate change—or not. The federal government, in other words, is not always the boss of federal money. If the goal is to reduce climate effects, “it’s not a strategic approach,” says Beth Osborne, a former DOT official who is now the director of Transportation for America.</p> <p>Now, the Biden administration is trying to put a light thumb on the scale, for road safety and for the planet. In a memo to staff published Thursday, Federal Highway Administration deputy administrator Stephanie Pollack directed her staff to encourage state and local governments to consider fixing existing roads before building new ones. The agency is urging state officials to consider strengthening non-highways, like service roads or bridges, that are in tough shape. They’ll also gently remind state and local officials that</p>

climate-friendly projects, like bike lanes and walking paths, need less stringent environmental review than new roads and bridges. The new policy will apply to \$350 billion in federal highway funding.

Local officials generally prefer building new stuff, to show off at ribbon cuttings, rather than maintaining old stuff. Want to cut a ribbon soonest? A bike lane might be your best bet, the feds say.

The administration has to ask, rather than require, local governments to prioritize climate change because Congress passed up opportunities to do otherwise while putting together the [infrastructure](#) bill. The House version of the legislation, which lawmakers passed in the summer, included provisions that would have forced states accepting funding to fix highways before building new ones or expanding them. It would have required states that produce more greenhouse gas emissions to dedicate more money to reducing them. And it would have forced funding recipients to show how their projects contributed to climate resilience. The Senate nixed all that.

The DOT's gentle, "have you thought about this?" approach to climate-friendly and safe road infrastructure may feel toothless. But states that have experimented with similar approaches say it's helpful. In Colorado, Governor Jared Polis has urged the state DOT to emphasize people-friendly—rather than builder-friendly—infrastructure projects.

More than half of the state's transportation money goes toward "state of good repair" projects, like filling potholes, fixing bridges and viaducts, and adding shoulders to rural roads for safety, says Shoshana Lew, executive director of Colorado's DOT. Prioritizing safety and climate effects "forces the conversation to be more rounded," says Lew. "It makes you think really hard about whether the project is worth it, and what the implications will be." As a result of Colorado's approach, she says, an expansion project on Interstate 70 will include a new van shuttle system that could grow bigger with demand.

On Thursday, the Colorado Transportation Commission took the approach a step further, [passing a new rule](#) requiring the state DOT and local planning organizations to evaluate transportation projects' possible effects on climate emissions, and divert the money to other places if they're determined to be too high. Some communities [have argued](#) they really do need new highways and highway expansions, and they worry the rule will curtail their access to jobs and businesses in places that have long been car-centric.

Back in DC, the Biden administration has found other ways to challenge the country's building impulses. The Federal Highway Administration last week [proposed a rule](#) that would create a new way for local planning organizations to measure and report driving-related greenhouse gas emissions, to help them make better decisions. The agency has also held up a Houston highway expansion as it [investigates complaints](#) that the project would disproportionately displace homes and businesses largely owned by Black people. That suggests the administration has managed to spark conversation about the effects of highway construction on the communities that surround them, and on the planet. The question will be whether talk will delay action—and whether it's too late for America's most climate-vulnerable places.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Peninsula schools 'monitoring situation'
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/community/gateway/g-news/article256667132.html
GIST	<p>The Peninsula School District is "closely monitoring the situation" following a much-shared TikTok post threatening violence in schools, but does not believe the threat to be credible, the district told parents late Thursday.</p> <p>"We have become aware of a troubling post that has been shared widely this week on the social media platform TikTok," the unsigned Twitter post said. "The post refers to a threat to school safety 'for every school in the USA, even elementary' on Friday, Dec. 17.</p> <p>"The post appears to be part of a national TikTok trend and did not originate in our school district. ... While we do not believe the threat to be credible, or directed at any Peninsula School District schools, we are closely monitoring the situation and taking it seriously," the district said.</p>

Tacoma Public Schools, reacting to the same threat, said they will be operating in a modified lockdown Friday. “That simply means all exterior doors will be locked while classes operate as normal inside each school,” said Superintendent Carla Santorno.

Joint Base Lewis-McChord also notified personnel of the threat on Thursday.

“Schools will operate as normal; however, JBLM Provost Marshal will have an increased military police presence around the on-base schools as added precaution,” the military post said on Facebook.

School districts across the United States reacted to the threat, according to the Associated Press.

In Gilroy, Calif., classes at the high school were canceled. School officials in states including Arizona, Connecticut, Illinois, Montana, New York and Pennsylvania said Thursday there would be an increased police presence because of the threats.

In a statement on Twitter, TikTok said it was working with law enforcement to investigate.

“We handle even rumored threats with utmost seriousness,” the statement said, “which is why we’re working with law enforcement to look into warnings about potential violence at schools even though we have not found evidence of such threats originating or spreading via TikTok.”

The threats outraged educators around the country. “Whether done as a joke or with malicious intent, it’s unacceptable. We know our school personnel will do everything in their power to keep our students safe,” officials with the Iowa State Education Association, the Iowa Association of School Boards and School Administrators of Iowa said in a joint statement.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Pierce Co. deputies wearing body-cams
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/crime/article256648747.html
GIST	<p>Pierce County Sheriff’s Department has issued body cameras to nearly all of its patrol deputies and installed dashboard cameras on all patrol cars as the department finalizes implementation of the technology.</p> <p>Sheriff’s officials planned to be using the cameras by this summer, but negotiations between the department and the Pierce County Deputy Sheriff’s Independent Guild pushed back their use.</p> <p>The groups had reached a tentative agreement on policy but hadn’t agreed on whether or how much deputies should be paid because of the addition of the cameras.</p> <p>The two groups have since reached an agreement on that decision and have a 12-page policy on the use of the cameras, sheriff’s department spokesperson Sgt. Darren Moss said. He said deputies have been sent the policy and are taught it as part of a five-hour training course they undergo before being issued body cameras. Moss couldn’t speak to the details of the agreement over pay.</p> <p>The News Tribune wasn’t able to reach a guild representative for comment.</p> <p>In January, the County Council allocated \$1.75 million for the cameras. In July and August, Axon delivered 351 body cameras and 242 vehicle dashboard cameras to the department. That includes 11 spare body cameras and seven spare dashboard camera kits.</p> <p>The sheriff’s department said in a Facebook post the use of the cameras is meant to promote transparency in law enforcement.</p>

The policy outlined the following situations where the dashboard camera or body camera should be activated:

- Law Enforcement and investigative contacts including domestic violence calls, custodial arrests, uses of force, in progress crimes, suspect contacts, mental health or suicidal person, searches that are done with consent or exigency, and field interview situations. It is not intended that the [body-worn camera] be activated during the investigation of routine property crimes which are not in progress.
- Traffic stops, including, but not limited to, traffic violations, stranded motorist assistance, vehicle or foot pursuits and all investigatory stops.
- Self-initiated activity in which a member would normally notify South Sound 911
- Any in-person contact that becomes adversarial after the initial contact in a situation that would not otherwise require recording, as soon as feasible.

According to the policy document, the policy is not meant to describe every possible situation where the cameras should be used.

Once deputies start recording, the policy requires them to continue until the incident has concluded.

Training began in the last week of November. Moss said he expects everyone to have been trained by mid-January. Detectives are the next group to receive training.

He said the department prioritized training patrol deputies first because they in public daily. All sworn deputies will be required to wear body cameras, including the chiefs and sheriff. Dashboard cameras are installed on all patrol cars but will not be in department vehicles driven by detectives.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Sawant defeats recall effort by slim margin
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/seattle-city-councilmember-kshama-sawant-defeats-recall-effort/
GIST	<p>Seattle City Councilmember Kshama Sawant has turned back an effort to recall her from office after a 10-day vote count.</p> <p>Supporters of Sawant — Seattle’s only socialist council member and the first in the city’s history to face a recall — narrowly outdid those in favor of a recall, claiming 50.4% of the vote.</p> <p>On Thursday, just 306 of the 41,000 votes counted separated Sawant from the recall effort, with results to be certified on Friday.</p> <p>Any challenged ballots resolved between the time votes were counted on Thursday afternoon and the 4:30 p.m. deadline — about a two-hour window — were to be added to the count before certification, according to King County Elections Chief of Staff Kendall Hodson.</p> <p>That number is unlikely to change the results.</p> <p>“We think this victory up against the odds we were facing is a real vindication of the movement-building approach that Kshama has taken to office,” Bryan Koulouris, a leader of the Kshama Solidarity Campaign said Thursday.</p> <p>Koulouris also attributed part of Sawant’s success to her support of progressive ideas like \$15 minimum wage efforts in 2014 and her ongoing fight to implement rent control.</p>

Sawant, a third-term council member representing District 3, [claimed an apparent victory last Friday](#), though the race was too close to call with [hundreds of outstanding challenged ballots](#).

“It appears we have defeated the combined efforts of big business, the right wing, corporate media, the courts and the political establishment who sought to remove our socialist council office by any means necessary,” Sawant said to a crowd of supporters last week.

Henry Bridger II, leader of the recall effort, acknowledged Sawant’s likely victory last Friday.

“While this election may not end with removing Sawant from office, let her narrow escape send a clear message: Seattle voters will not tolerate slash-and-burn politicians who shirk accountability and divide the city,” Bridger said in a statement.

Bridger was not immediately available for comment Thursday.

On the ballot, Sawant was charged with three counts of “misfeasance, malfeasance and violation of the oath of office.”

She was accused of [using city resources to support a proposed “Tax Amazon” ballot initiative](#), acting out of compliance with public disclosure requirements. In May, she settled with the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission for \$3,516. Sawant admitted to this charge, but said she was unaware it was a violation.

She was also accused [of disobeying state COVID-19 orders by unlocking City Hall to hundreds of protesters](#) one evening during Seattle’s racial justice protests in June 2020. Sawant admits to and was recorded opening the facility to activists, but says she did not violate any COVID orders in doing so.

Finally, Sawant was accused of leading [a protest march to Mayor Jenny Durkan’s house](#), though Durkan’s address is protected by a state confidentiality program because of her past work as a federal prosecutor. Sawant denies involvement in the organization of the event or even knowing the march was heading to Durkan’s house, despite the march being advertised in advance on social media and in a news release as a “March on the Mayor’s Mansion.”

By turning back the recall, Sawant retains her seat on the City Council through the end of her term in 2023.

The [recall election](#) resulted in just shy of a 53% turnout from District 3 voters.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Study: steep toll healthcare workers
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/mental-health/1-in-5-nurses-say-theyll-quit-their-careers-as-pandemic-takes-steep-toll-on-mental-health-wa-study-shows/
GIST	<p>In fall 2020, Seattle therapist Shelley Green started taking appointments with health care workers whose lives had turned profoundly bleak during the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>Green had faced her own stresses. She’d given birth in spring 2020, during some of the most uncertain days of the pandemic in Washington. And as a member of the health care community, she felt fortunate she could do her teletherapy work from the comfort of her home. For a small group of health care workers without that luxury, she decided to offer her therapy services free of charge.</p> <p>She listened to their fears. They were terrified of bringing the coronavirus home and accidentally killing a family member. As the months wore on, she heard their disillusionment. Some were so ill-supported at work, by their communities and by public officials, she said, that they felt they were being “left to die.”</p> <p>These days, Green hears their anger.</p>

They feel disrespected, even ridiculed, by those most at risk for getting sick or needing their care: people who won't wear a mask or refuse to get vaccinated.

Green's clients' experiences fit with startling new research. Repeated exposure to sickness and death, and a sense of fear and anxiety that's rippled across the medical and first-responder communities during the pandemic, is crippling the mental well-being of many people in these vital workforces, [according to a new study](#) published Thursday in the Journal of General Internal Medicine and led by Dr. Rebecca Hendrickson, a physician and researcher at VA Puget Sound Health Care System and assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral medicine at University of Washington School of Medicine.

More than half of frontline health care workers — and about 40% of first responders like firefighters and paramedics — say the pandemic has decreased their willingness or ability to stick with their careers.

One in five nurses say it's "not at all likely" they'll still be working in their field in five to 10 years; about 17% of first responders say the same. Of the four pro bono clients Green has worked with, only one is still in the job they had pre-pandemic, she said.

Being a trusted caregiver — and then feeling helpless in that role — has caused serious feelings of loss and despair.

"Everyone is quitting," said Laura Wood, a social worker at Swedish Cherry Hill in Seattle, adding that nurses, emergency department technicians, respiratory therapists and social workers are leaving "left and right." "Our staff is so burned out. We're just so tired."

But the research offers some hope: Even if someone experienced lots of pandemic-induced stress, a supportive work environment made a big difference.

People who felt their employer was looking out for them, or didn't ask them to take unnecessary risks, did much better than those who felt unsupported, the research suggests.

"We don't need to protect people from every aspect [of their jobs]," Hendrickson said. "If you can increase the amount of support people have ... you can make a really big difference in people's experiences and people's ability to recover and cope effectively with the trauma they're experiencing as part of their job."

"Red flag"

Early in the pandemic, Hendrickson was struck by how health care workers in the pandemic's epicenters — Italy, then New York City — described their sleep.

Even though they were exhausted, they struggled to drift off. When they finally did, their days haunted their dreams. Nightmares were common. They'd often awake in a panic.

"This was concerning," she said. Anecdotes from health care workers sounded eerily similar to reports from [combat veterans she worked with at the VA](#). This particular [brand of sleep disturbance](#) put people at risk for persistent, long-term symptoms like anxiety, depression and PTSD, Hendrickson said. It was of particular concern to Hendrickson, because it signaled that health care workers might continue to have symptoms even after pandemic stresses subsided.

The crushing stress on health care workers was well-documented early in the pandemic. Large, international [studies on health care workers' well-being were published in major research journals](#). An [ER doctor's suicide made national news](#). Millions of [people blew whistles and banged on pots and pans](#) to honor health care workers and their sacrifices.

What wasn't clear, Hendrickson realized, were the specific parts of pandemic life that led some but not others to experience psychiatric symptoms — and why it could be difficult for certain frontline workers to bounce back when daily stressors ended.

From September 2020 to February 2021, Hendrickson and her colleagues recruited 510 first responders across 47 states to answer those questions. The researchers didn't formally diagnose the participants, but asked them to complete four standardized psychiatric assessments, a pandemic-specific questionnaire and questions about their professions. Although much of the study took place before vaccines were widely available — and health care workers found themselves treating COVID-19 patients who chose not to be vaccinated — Hendrickson is [now enrolling more participants](#) and following up with earlier participants to see if anything has changed for them.

In general, the more pandemic-related stressors someone experienced, the greater their psychiatric burden and likelihood of leaving their profession, the researchers found.

Participants' pandemic experiences were tied to symptoms of depression, anxiety, insomnia and post-traumatic stress disorder. Feelings of demoralization, in particular, predicted high levels of psychiatric symptoms and disinterest in their careers.

More than 12% of the health care workers, and nearly 20% of first responders, reported thinking about hurting themselves, or that they would be better off dead, at least several days during the past two weeks. Paramedics had a uniquely high prevalence of these types of harmful thoughts, suggesting that they in particular might benefit from mental health support.

"It was just kind of overwhelming and a red flag," Hendrickson said. "We have an urgent need to address these issues both because there's just a really high level of suffering and distress ... and we have a moral obligation as a society to address this type of suffering in people who have worked hard to protect all of us during this pandemic."

Care for caregivers

Wood, who assesses depressed and suicidal emergency-room patients, has a unique window into health care workers' trauma.

"Because that's my specialty, my coworkers will come and share their troubles with me," Wood said.

Her colleagues care for COVID-19 patients who are sick and dying alone. Some have called out sick, fearing the trauma they'd return to on their next shift. Those who ultimately decided to quit have symptoms ranging from insomnia, to suicidal thoughts, to overwhelming feelings of sadness, anxiety and depression, she said.

Wood, an executive board member for the health care union at Swedish, said the facility recently added a new mental health benefit at the union's urging. Staff and their family members now have access to online mental health care and get 25 free visits each year. "You can see someone that same day or the next day," she said. "It's really increased the access."

The notion that the health care workforce needs better support isn't new, said Elaine Walsh, an associate professor at the University of Washington School of Nursing, but "it's come to a head and really come to a moment of crisis."

In addition to mental health care access, systemic changes like ensuring workers get to take breaks — and that breaks are truly restful — would also help, Walsh said. Staffing shortages at the Cherry Hill facility for example, have made it difficult for staff to take time off, Wood said.

Giving workers free parking or other perks, Walsh said, could also make a difference. Making sure workers have a way to give employers feedback about their needs also helps build trust, Hendrickson said. To fight burnout, health care workers here are also [lobbying for retention bonuses and incentive pay](#) for employees who take extra shifts.

	<p>Green, the therapist, said employers also have a responsibility to train workers to recognize so-called secondary trauma — when someone is exposed to a traumatized person or their experiences. As caregivers, there’s a culture and expectation that first responders and health care workers push through: They move to the next room, handle whatever the next person needs, take it home with them, and get up the next day to do it again.</p> <p>Often, people in the health care field don’t acknowledge the toll this mindset has on mental health, and how it can make it harder for people to do their job well, Hendrickson said. Of the clients she’s worked with, Green said, many don’t realize this kind of trauma has a name.</p> <p>“She was like, ‘It’s just so hard for us. We’re always the last ones to seek what we need because we see ourselves as providing what other people need,’” she said of one person she had talked with.</p> <p>Recently, when talking with a nurse friend, Green encouraged her to look for a therapist among a growing network of mental health providers who have stepped up to provide free care.</p> <p>Her friend’s response was similar to one she’d heard from others — one plagued with concern that what they’d experienced wasn’t bad enough — that they weren’t “traumatized enough by this pandemic to get care on someone else’s dime.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 King Co. homeless count is much higher
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/homeless/spurning-old-way-of-counting-homeless-people-king-county-says-number-is-much-higher-than-previously-reported/
GIST	<p>The King County Regional Homelessness Authority made waves last month when it announced it would not be conducting a census of homeless people this year in the way the federal government has long required.</p> <p>Instead, Thursday, the authority announced a new method of counting homeless people — and a staggering difference in how many people it counted. According to the authority, 40,800 people were homeless at some point in 2020 in King County.</p> <p>At the last federally required point-in-time count in January 2020, a snapshot of homelessness over the course of one night, there were 11,700. The vast discrepancy is mostly because the new number takes the entire year into account rather than just one night but also because old counts have consistently missed many homeless people with serious mental illness and drug use disorders.</p> <p>King County was one of the first in the nation to perform the count, long before it was required by the federal government, but leaders have always acknowledged the process — which relied heavily on volunteers — had problems. Now, officials argue they have found a more accurate method, but it might not satisfy federal requirements.</p> <p>When Marc Dones took over the King County Regional Homelessness Authority earlier this year, figuring out a better number for how many people are actually homeless in the county was one of their first priorities.</p> <p>On Thursday, the county’s department of community and human services released a report saying more than 7,300 people a year slip through the homeless services system and are only served by public behavioral health services for mental illness or drug use. Cross-referencing that with homelessness data in county databases, leaders found that the number of people who were homeless at one point in 2020 or during the entire year was 40,800.</p> <p>Local governments primarily gather and communicate homelessness numbers via a “one-night count,” a volunteer-driven effort to survey homeless people just on one night in January each year. The U.S.</p>

Department of Housing and Urban Development requires the count every two years — on odd-numbered years. King County, though, has done it every year for decades.

Dones hopes the new number announced Thursday can help the community understand the gravity of the problem King County is facing and the investment required to fix it.

The new data, while complicated, reflects the Regional Homelessness Authority's effort to better track people with serious mental illness and drug use disorders who aren't being served by the state's underfunded behavioral health system and inefficient homelessness system. These people instead are often left to wander Seattle's streets in distress, sometimes causing high-profile incidents in business districts or neighborhoods.

Other people are not captured because they're in privately funded religious shelters such as Union Gospel Mission, according to Leo Flor, the director of the county Department of Community and Human Services, which completed the analysis.

"The premise is you can't solve a problem you don't understand," Flor said.

Dones, Flor and other officials warned this new 40,800 number, too, was not perfect.

"As we continue to get better at measuring homelessness, this number might change," said Christina McHugh, a data evaluation manager for the county. "In fact, it might initially go up, and that might be a good thing."

But the homelessness system across the country has long relied on the point-in-time count, even as officials warned it as a likely undercount year after year, and it's going to be hard to change things overnight.

The authority put the kibosh on the 2022 point-in-time count earlier this year, pointing out many of its flaws. This caused ripples in the homeless advocacy and research community and generated some criticism.

At first, HUD told the authority it needed to do the count anyway because King County had forgone the 2021 count as a COVID-19 precaution, the news site [PubliCola reported in November](#).

Now, the authority and the federal government are in discussion to find a way to satisfy the federal government's requirements but do the count over a month, according to spokespeople for both the authority and HUD.

Alison Eisinger, director of the Seattle-King County Coalition on Homelessness, a membership group of scores of homelessness nonprofits who used to manage the annual count, said that she and other leaders had acknowledged the flaws in the count for some time but found it an important way to engage the community.

"I am in no way surprised by the numbers shared today," Eisinger said. "The big question is — is this community at every level of government, elected leaders, business leaders, and housed and unhoused residents going to step up to do what we have to do?"

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HEADLINE	12/17 Millions barely scraping by amid holidays
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/17/americans-coronavirus-unemployment-holidays
GIST	For millions of Americans, the Covid-19 pandemic has left them and their families with little money or cause for celebrating the holidays this year.

“My youngest turns six on Christmas day and I can’t even get her a single present,” said Amanda Starr of Lebanon, Ohio, a single mother of three who has struggled to find work after her car was repossessed when she missed payments due to losing her retail job in the beginning of the pandemic.

Starr was one of millions of workers out of work who lost unemployment benefits when federal extended and pandemic unemployment benefits ended in September. She is spending the holidays currently worrying about her family facing eviction soon and has experienced issues in receiving federal childcare tax credit payments.

As of November, 15.6 million workers in the US are still being affected by the pandemic’s economic downturn; 3.9 million US workers are out of the labor force due to Covid-19, 6.9 million workers are still unemployed, 2 million workers are still experiencing cuts to pays or work schedules due to Covid-19, and another 3 million workers are misclassified as employed or out of the labor force, according to the [Economic Policy Institute](#).

Several industries are still reeling from job shortfalls compared to prior to the pandemic, such as a [deficit of 1.3m jobs](#) in the leisure and hospitality sector and [951,000 jobs](#) in state and local governments.

Laura Nash, 38, of Bellingham, Washington, lost her engineering job on 19 October and has been waiting for over seven weeks for unemployment benefits while searching for a new job.

“Times are definitely tough and I don’t have any money for the holidays,” said Nash. “I’m lucky to be able to tag along with my parents for the holidays, but no gifts.”

She’s had to get by on help from her parents, food assistance through Snap and Medicaid, while continuing to try to push her unemployment benefits through until she finds another engineering job.

Andrea, 49, of Orlando, Florida, who requested to omit her last name, lost her job in restaurant management in late 2020 after getting injured in a car accident and being forced to take a long medical leave to recover.

She’s experienced several issues while trying to obtain unemployment benefits in Florida this year, from having to spend hours on hold to speak with a representative about her claim only to get disconnected, to technical issues and getting locked out of Florida’s unemployment website.

“I’ve cried a lot since April,” she said. “I haven’t made one single step toward resolving this. I had to leave my vehicle because I had no way to pay for the repairs it needed and I’ve been without a place to call home since around June.”

She’s been homeless since June, often spending nights either with friends or around Walmart parking lots, as she said the few nearby homeless shelters have been full and she hasn’t been able to obtain housing or rental assistance.

“I’m not looking forward to Christmas on the streets, but that’s my reality,” she added.

According to the most recent [US Census Household Pulse Survey](#) conducted from 29 September to 11 October, about 20 million Americans reported not having enough food to eat in the past seven days and over 44 million Americans were relying on either Snap or other forms of food assistance in the past seven days. Food banks have [reported](#) demand is still far above pre-pandemic levels.

“Christmas is solely provided by my parents and in-laws this year as all I can provide is food for my kids, two girls, 13 and 16,” said Alonzo Werner, a welder helper in Wisconsin who applied for unemployment benefits three months ago due to a lack of welding work in his area, but is still waiting for his claim to be processed. “My family has been going to food banks for food and trying to apply for food stamps.”

Colleen Nicole of New Jersey was laid off from her IT job of nine years due to downsizing in March.

She's experienced two long lapses in unemployment assistance since her layoff, when she first applied and since September 2021 when her benefits were mistakenly cut off.

"There is no celebrating the holidays. I do what I can to feel in the 'holiday mood', but it's just stress and the unknown as to when I'll be able to get the benefits I was told I'd get at this time," she said. "I'm thankful I do have some friends that are housing me, since unemployment has caused me to lose my place and ruined my credit, making it impossible for me to get a new place right now. If it does not get resolved by March, however, I will be homeless."

Robyn Melissa Hirshburg of Yardley, Pennsylvania, was laid off in December 2020 after the pharmaceutical company Bristol Myers Squibb terminated the contract she worked under and is still experiencing issues in getting her unemployment benefits approved.

"I'm interviewing non-stop with great companies, but haven't been able to lock anything in and the holidays spread interviews further," said Hirshburg, who is diabetic and suffers from heart issues. "There will be no gifts this year for the holiday. This year it's hard to celebrate any holiday when I have so much uncertainty about being able to afford my home, my utilities and food. I never thought I'd be in this spot."

As millions of Americans are still out of work, experiencing issues with unemployment delays or trying to find suitable work, many other Americans are still grappling with the loss of loved ones to Covid-19 and the financial impacts associated with suddenly losing a loved one.

[More than 790,000 Americans](#) have died from Covid-19 since March 2020, with some public health experts noting death counts could be [as high as 20%](#) more than official counts due to undercounting of deaths.

Olivia Williams, 21, of Panama City, Florida, [lost her mother](#), Sharon Williams, in August when her mother caught Covid-19 after a co-worker at the hair salon she worked at tested positive. Williams shared an apartment with her mother and relied on her for financial security.

"Financially, I've felt like I'm never going to recover," said Williams. "We lived together so rent became my responsibility on top of losing my mom and best friend out of nowhere in a span of two weeks."

Janie Garlick, 56, of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, lost her husband, [David Garletts](#), 56, to Covid-19 in October.

A steel worker for nearly 20 years, he tested positive for Covid-19 on 22 October and was hospitalized shortly after, where he fought for his life in intensive care before passing away on 24 November.

"He died that Wednesday night, 9.21pm. It was the eve of Thanksgiving, which was his favorite holiday," said Garlick.

She is now struggling financially, having relied on her husband's income, and angry that he did not get vaccinated for Covid-19.

"Our house is too expensive to keep so we must now find another home. We, now I, have custody of our granddaughters and they're scared we're going to be homeless," she added. "Covid stole our loved one, our security, and the pain we feel is unbearable."

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HEADLINE	12/16 'Winter of severe illness and death'
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/16/us-hospitals-brace-for-potential-omicron-surge-in-january
GIST	Joe Biden on Thursday warned of "a winter of severe illness and death" for those not vaccinated against Covid-19, amid a wave of Delta infections and as new Omicron cases are beginning to surge in America.

The US president spoke as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) warned the Omicron variant could peak as early as January and states are scrambling to prepare for overloaded hospitals.

The US has passed 800,000 coronavirus deaths, including one in 100 Americans over the age of 65.

After a briefing on the pandemic from advisers on Thursday afternoon, Biden said Omicron is “now spreading and it’s going to increase”.

“For the unvaccinated, we are looking at a winter of severe illness and death,” he said, urging Americans to get vaccinated and get their boosters as soon as possible.

The Omicron variant accounted for nearly 3% of Covid cases in the US as of Saturday – up from only 0.4% the week before, according to [data](#) from the CDC. The variant is expected to continue rising rapidly, based on the experiences of other countries and could be dominant within weeks.

“I suspect that those numbers are going to shoot up dramatically in the next couple of weeks,” Céline Gounder, infectious disease specialist and epidemiologist at New York University and Bellevue Hospital, told reporters on Wednesday. She expects an Omicron wave to peak in late January and then come down sometime in February.

In a meeting with state health leaders on Tuesday, the CDC [presented](#) two [scenarios](#), based on models, for how the variant might drive infections in the next few weeks and months. Omicron and Delta cases could peak as soon as January or a smaller surge of Omicron could happen in the spring.

It’s unclear which variant, Delta or Omicron, will dominate in the next few months or if they will coexist, Gounder said. Regardless, “we anticipate an increase in hospitalizations, an increase in deaths and an increase in the burden on the health care system over the next couple of months.”

The US was already in the grips of a Delta wave that began before the Thanksgiving holiday, and officials fear that travel and gatherings over holidays like Christmas and New Year’s could add explosive growth to an already strained situation.

Schools across the US are seeing rises in cases, and some are closing early or cutting back on in-person activities. In New York, Cornell University reported 903 cases among students this week – many of them cases of the Omicron variant among fully vaccinated people. The school closed early and went virtual.

In several states, hospitals are already close to being overwhelmed. In Michigan, intensivists are now volunteering to work for free in ICUs, one doctor [reports](#).

“Healthcare systems need to have a plan in place for what will likely be a surge in hospitalizations in the coming weeks,” Gounder said. “What are staffing plans, particularly over the holidays, when staff are going to want to take some time off themselves?” That may involve delaying elective procedures to reallocate staff, and working with agencies to bring in travel nurses and specialists as needed, she said.

Public health officials should ramp up testing and surveillance across the country, she said.

Some of the funds from the American Rescue Plan may be used at the state and local level for purchasing rapid tests, as Massachusetts and Colorado have begun doing. With Omicron, frequent testing may be more important than it was with previous variants, Gounder said.

“Omicron has an even shorter incubation period of two to three days. If you want to have a reasonable chance of catching most of those infections and being able to do something about it, you really need to be testing every day.”

Between 15 and 30% of all positive tests should be sequenced to understand which variants are spreading across the country, Gounder said. “We’ve dramatically ramped up the volume of testing, but we’re not

where we need to be and it's still a bit patchy across the country." Wastewater surveillance can also be a "really useful tool to have your finger on the pulse of what's coming and how quickly."

Biden's national plan for addressing Omicron [specifically excludes restrictions](#) like stay-at-home orders and the majority of states have seen their local [health powers significantly curtailed](#) during the pandemic, making it more difficult to enact emergency measures to slow the spread of the virus.

Continuing to ramp up vaccinations, including initial doses and booster shots, will also be important to battling current and present waves. That will take a concerted campaign to educate the public on why it's important, for instance, to vaccinate newly eligible children.

Improving ventilation and air filtration is also important, and so is wearing high-quality masks, Gounder said. "People know about masks. They may not know, however, that KN-95s and KF-94s would be the preferred mask. How do you get them? How do you make sure they're the right kind?"

It is still too early to tell if Omicron is more or less deadly than previous variants. "The virulence really depends on the age of the person we're talking about, as well as other demographics, but age is probably the most important one," Gounder said. "With the early data coming out of South Africa, much of that was in young, relatively healthy, college-student-aged people."

But the evidence available does indicate the variant is more transmissible and immune-evasive, making infection more likely among those who are vaccinated or have recovered from earlier bouts with the virus. In the New York and New Jersey health zone, for instance, Omicron is present in 13% of cases.

Meanwhile, a panel of outside advisers to the CDC voted to recommend [directing Americans towards the mRNA vaccines](#) for protection against Covid-19 – meaning the shots by [Pfizer/BioNTech](#) or Moderna in the US – in preference to Johnson & Johnson's, because of the risks for blood clotting. The regulator still needs to sign off on the guidance.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Texas: armed groups arrive; patrol border
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-a-texas-border-town-armed-groups-arrive-to-look-for-migrants-11639668989?mod=hp_lead_pos5
GIST	<p>BRACKETTVILLE, Texas—As this South Texas border county has seen a jump in illegal border crossings, Sheriff Brad Coe is cooperating with groups of armed private citizens to help patrol the border and arrest migrants for trespassing.</p> <p>The Kinney County sheriff has been in regular contact for months with a group of men donning body armor and rifles while patrolling to look for migrants. Another armed group offered use of a high-tech drone, and went on a patrol along with the sheriff. It has also pursued potential partnerships with private security firms.</p> <p>A new Texas law allows migrants to be arrested for trespassing and has attracted such groups, and local officials are either offering tacit support or openly welcoming them. The groups say they aim to stop the migrants they find and pass them off to law enforcement to arrest.</p> <p>Mr. Coe, a former Border Patrol agent, said he is looking for any help he can get in trying to drive migrant traffic elsewhere.</p> <p>"The whole premise is if [migrants] know they'll be arrested, they'll go somewhere else," he said.</p> <p>State authorities have resisted these private operations, saying they are concerned about armed civilians trying to act as law enforcement. On Wednesday, the ACLU and nine other organizations filed a complaint to the U.S. Department of Justice, requesting that it investigate Texas state agencies and local governments</p>

involved in the effort to arrest immigrants. Among their concerns, they said, is the support, tacit or open, Kinney County has given such private groups.

It isn't clear how many migrants the private groups have stopped or arrested.

Over the summer, county leaders and Gov. Greg Abbott declared the border situation a disaster, a classification typically used for events such as hurricanes. Mr. Abbott, a Republican, [began an experimental state effort](#) to enforce federal immigration law by using state troopers to arrest and jail migrants on misdemeanor trespassing charges.

Of some 2,000 arrests by state troopers under the program, named Operation Lone Star, the majority have occurred in Kinney County. The volume has overwhelmed courts in the small community, which has had just one jury trial in the past seven years, leaving migrants in jail for months before seeing a judge. The arrests have resulted in few convictions.

Kinney County, a ranching county of 3,569 people along 13 miles of Rio Grande river frontage, sits midway along Texas's 1,254-mile border with Mexico and was once one of its quietest regions for illegal border crossings. Shifting immigration patterns, combined with an upswing in illegal crossings in the wake of [the Covid-19 pandemic](#), changed that.

Samuel Hall, leader of a North Texas based group called Patriots for America Militia, said his group of volunteers conducts patrols on public property, looking for migrants who may have crossed the border illegally, administering humanitarian aid when necessary and calling authorities when needed.

Mr. Hall said he doesn't forcibly detain anyone, which would be illegal. That said, he said he realizes that foreigners encountering heavily armed people may not understand that.

Mr. Coe meets with Mr. Hall periodically, Mr. Coe said, but hasn't worked with him officially. "I don't know if they've caught anything or not," Mr. Coe said of the group's efforts to intercept migrants. Mr. Hall said he has worked closely with Mr. Coe and has called his office whenever the group has encountered immigrants.

When Patriots for America arrived in October, the sheriff welcomed the group and considered deputizing some of its members to his department, he said. But the plan received pushback from the Texas Department of Public Safety, he said. That made some county officials worry that the state would pull resources from the county if it partnered with private militias, some officials said.

Travis Considine, a spokesman for Texas Department of Public Safety, said the agency doesn't support partnering with militia-type groups. He said the agency had never threatened to pull resources from the county. "We do not want to work with [militias], but we do not control the sheriffs," he said.

This year, the county began seeing high-speed chases and reports of migrants breaking into homes looking for food and water, Mr. Coe said. Ranchers have been rattled by strangers walking across their property and frustrated by damage to fences that caused livestock to escape. At least 16 migrants have died in the brush there since April, Mr. Coe said. No violent crimes have been reported.

Kinney County has embraced the state's trespassing arrest efforts. It is a deeply conservative area where the sheriff has plastered Donald Trump stickers on his work desk and keeps a life-size cutout of Vice President Kamala Harris in his office to mock during televised news interviews.

Mr. Coe has pressed trespassing charges on behalf of some property owners, saying he is acting as the agent for several ranches. Driving west toward the border through ranch land, he rattles off the number of arrests of migrants and smugglers the Department of Public Safety has made there in recent days.

The county has sought to bring in additional private funding for border efforts. The home page of its governmental website declares the county is “drawing a line in the sand” and links to a site soliciting donations to respond to the border “invasion” that has raised nearly \$21,000.

At a county commissioners meeting this week, Patriots for America’s Mr. Hall thanked them for their support.

After the meeting, County Judge Tully Shahan, the local elected executive, told Mr. Hall, “Don’t come here and use us as a photo op.” Mr. Shahan, outside the meeting, said Mr. Hall’s group was uninvited in county efforts and said he supports Texas DPS. He declined to comment further.

Another commissioner, Mark Frerich, stopped Mr. Hall outside the meeting to express a different view, that he supports having the group there. “Don’t take it to heart, you’re doing good,” Mr. Frerich said.

The county has sought out other private, armed groups to do immigrant patrols. In July, officials approved a letter of intent to hire operatives from Garrison Trading Associates, a private security contractor which cited work in Iraq and Afghanistan. The deal fell through, in part because of a leadership shift at Garrison and in part because the county couldn’t afford it, those involved said.

In September, Mr. Coe welcomed Christie Hutcherson, head of Women Fighting for America, a group that has patrolled in various border areas and sought to partner with law enforcement. The sheriff partnered with Ms. Hutcherson and members of her organization who were armed to patrol the county at night, where a drone helped locate a large group of migrants, he said. The group has submitted a proposal to formally partner with the county.

Mr. Coe said the county couldn’t afford Ms. Hutcherson’s proposal, which he described as a cost higher than the Sheriff Department’s annual operating budget. Instead, he this week asked commissioners for permission to fund a similar drone from the online donations the county has collected.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks extremist groups, flagged Ms. Hutcherson’s group for spreading extreme conspiracy theories.

Ms. Hutcherson said that her organization isn’t a militia. It believes in working through law enforcement channels, she said. She had not seen how the SPLC characterized her, and said “I’m not an extremist. I’m a patriot.”

A North Texas man, who a spokesman said was in Kinney County patrolling for migrants on a private ranch, was arrested there this week on charges of participating in the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. Federal authorities said he was a member of the Patriot Boys Militia.

Kate Huddleston, a staff attorney with the ACLU, said the organization is concerned about both the actions of private organizations and the movement of the county toward potentially partnering with one of them. A group interfering with anyone’s free travel based on a suspicion that they might be migrants is an interference in others’ rights, Ms. Huddleston said.

“Kinney County has not just sought to partner with militias, but also war contractors,” she said. “That indicates a level of militarization that is particularly concerning and alarming in the potential for violence.”

Mr. Hall said objections won’t dissuade him.

“We’re here because God called us and we’re going to keep operating,” he said.

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SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19-cancels-christmas-around-europeagain-11639660145?mod=hp_featst_pos3
GIST	<p>From Spanish holidays to Greek celebrations to German circus performances, the Covid-19 pandemic has derailed plans and upended Christmas traditions across Europe for a second year in a row.</p> <p>After a surge in cases this fall dashed hopes of a normal festive season this year, authorities on the continent have tightened restrictions to avoid overwhelming hospitals. Expectations that the highly transmissible Omicron variant will soon take hold are further adding to the fears.</p> <p>For families and businesses around the region, this means gatherings, festivities and holiday trips are being scaled down or canceled altogether. Instead of shopping for presents, Europeans are lining up for their booster shots.</p> <p>The U.K. government, which recently put in place a number of Omicron-related restrictions, says the number of Omicron cases is doubling every two days. The country on Wednesday reported its highest number of Covid-19 cases since the pandemic began. Denmark and Norway this week introduced new curbs on nightlife. France has closed its nightclubs and said it would restrict tourist arrivals from the U.K. starting Saturday. In Germany, politicians are debating whether to make vaccinations compulsory, following the example of neighboring Austria, where shots will become mandatory from February.</p> <p>“I can imagine how many of you are saddened, like me, to know that this Christmas is once again being overshadowed by the pandemic,” European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said Thursday.</p> <p>In the U.S., Omicron has been identified in more than 30 states, from Hawaii to New York, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In California, authorities this week reinstated an indoor mask mandate.</p> <p>Across Europe, tightening restrictions and new uncertainties are hitting an already virus-weary populace. In some German provinces, traditional Christmas markets have been closed and the country has banned firecrackers and big gatherings for New Year’s Eve. In Paris, the Élysée Palace canceled its holiday party while towns across the rest of France are calling off Christmas concerts.</p> <p>Cath Colbridge, 50, who works at a primary school in the South Wales village of Cefn Cribwr, said that she and her husband had to cancel their Christmas holiday to Spain after the hotel closed down. It was her sixth canceled holiday during the pandemic, including delaying a trip to New York three times because of changing regulations.</p> <p>“I’m so frustrated that they keep changing the travel rules,” Ms. Colbridge said. “It’s got to the point now that we’ve given up planning holidays abroad and bought a camper van, so we can at least get away for a few days.”</p> <p>In Fleetwood, northern England, Rick Gilby, chairman of the fan club of the local soccer team, was planning a Christmas party where the local children would meet the soccer players. Mr. Gilby, 50, had already bought candy boxes for the children and the club’s mascot, Captain Cod, was to make an appearance.</p> <p>On Monday, Mr. Gilby posted a message on the fan club’s Facebook page: “Christmas is canceled.”</p> <p>“We were feeling like we were getting back to normal, we were doing all we can and yet you keep getting these knock backs,” he said later. “And we always seem to be getting these extra measures around Christmastime. It’s deflating.”</p> <p>Some 1,000 miles east, in Berlin, the virus disappointed another group of soccer fans. For years, supporters of 1. FC Union Berlin had gathered at the Stadion An der Alten Försterei, or the stadium at the old forester’s house, to hold candles and sing Christmas songs.</p>

Now, like last year, the stadium “will again remain silent and dark on December 23rd,” the club wrote on its website.

In Berlin’s Pankow district, the Rosa Luxemburg high school has asked students to take back the hot plates and waffle makers they had brought to the school ahead of its yearly Christmas market after the event was canceled. The school orchestra’s annual concert, which would normally take place in a Church, will go on without an audience and be streamed over Zoom.

Other Christmas traditions are being disrupted.

After postponing its 25th anniversary last year, the Christmas circus in the southern German city of Offenburg called off its performances once again this year. On the Greek peninsula of Halkidiki, local authorities scrapped public celebrations due to the high number of infections. Officials, however, are planning to decorate the communities in recognition of the “psychological need of young and old to celebrate the spirit of Christmas,” according to a statement.

In Les Pieux, northern France, local authorities are requiring organizers to enclose Christmas markets with a perimeter fence and have guards at the entry points to check people’s vaccine certificates.

“There were a number of conditions that weren’t possible for an association like ours,” said Valentin Bourdet, who heads Les Pieux’s local business group and canceled the local market. “It’s frustrating.”

Daily cases in France hit an all-time high earlier this month, and authorities said it is possible cases could remain at near-record levels in the weeks to come.

The virus has also crept back into nursing homes. Several hundred facilities across France have been locked down again, said Sabrina Deliry, who represents an association of family members of nursing home residents. That is raising the possibility that some residents will spend a second consecutive Christmas separated from their families.

“Like in the first wave, these facilities are completely locked down, visits are suspended, residents are confined to their rooms,” Ms. Deliry said.

In some places, cancellations stretch beyond the holidays. The opulent Vienna Opera Ball in February—one of the highlights of the Austrian society season that takes place in the Neo-Renaissance building of the Vienna State Opera house—was scrapped amid rising uncertainty among guests about the Omicron variant, the opera said.

The snowballing cancellations across Europe in the run-up to the holidays have dealt a blow to the hospitality industry.

In the U.K., trade association UKHospitality said Monday that takings in hospitality venues would be down by around 40% this month compared with prepandemic levels. In Germany, nine out of 10 restaurants, hotels and other hospitality businesses have reported Christmas party cancellations, according to industry association Dehoga.

“The situation in the hospitality industry is worsening day by day,” the association’s president Guido Zöllick said. “The companies have experienced a huge wave of cancellations. Many could no longer work economically.”

Back in the Welsh countryside, Ms. Colbridge sees a silver lining: with their Spain trip canceled, her husband can dress up as Santa and go visit children around the village. She now hopes to make it to New York in February.

HEADLINE	12/16 Highly vaccinated SKorea can't slow Covid
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/highly-vaccinated-south-korea-cant-slow-down-covid-19-11639652626?mod=hp_trending_now_article_pos4
GIST	<p>SEOUL—South Korea had successfully contained Covid-19 throughout much of the pandemic, and it now has one of the highest vaccination rates among wealthy countries.</p> <p>But historic levels of infections, hospitalizations and deaths are prompting the country to reverse plans to reopen and instead take some of the most aggressive measures against the virus of any country in the world.</p> <p>In recent days, health officials accelerated the timetable for adults to get a booster shot, down to three months from a prior wait of five months. Teens now must get vaccinated by February or face penalties. Starting next month, one South Korean city will use facial-recognition technology to automate contact tracing, as a way to speed up investigations.</p> <p>Then on Thursday, South Korean officials pivoted back to clampdowns from earlier in the pandemic. Most businesses will soon have to close by 9 p.m., including restaurants, bars and cafes. Private gatherings are limited to four vaccinated people.</p> <p>“I am sorry that we have had to once again strengthen antivirus measures,” South Korean President Moon Jae-in said.</p> <p>South Korea boasts one of the highest vaccination rates among wealthy countries—most of whom administered second vaccine doses in the fall, after having to wait earlier in the year as the U.S., U.K. and other Western countries got the first waves of supply. South Korea has administered vaccines from AstraZeneca PLC, Johnson & Johnson, Moderna Inc., and Pfizer Inc. and BioNTech SE.</p> <p>Some 81.5% of South Korea’s 52 million residents are fully vaccinated, according to Our World in Data, trailing only Portugal, Chile and Iceland among members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. By contrast, the vaccination rates stand at 61% in the U.S. and 69% in the U.K., according to Our World in Data.</p> <p>South Korea’s struggles show how difficult containing outbreaks remains, even in a place with a proven record of corralling viruses and where a swath of the population has gotten fully vaccinated. Public-health officials still see vaccines as an effective tool to combat outbreaks, and just a tiny fraction of the recent cases affect those who have received two Covid-19 shots.</p> <p>Governments, even those with high vaccination rates, will be forced to revert to clampdowns if healthcare systems get overrun, especially with the threat of Omicron because it is unclear whether two doses are as effective against the variant, said Teo Yik-Ying, dean of Singapore’s Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.</p> <p>“The assumptions that followed high vaccination rates may no longer be true,” Prof. Teo said.</p> <p>South Korea has reported 148 Omicron variant cases, though Delta remains the dominant force in what has been the country’s worst outbreak of the pandemic. Daily cases regularly exceed 7,000, tripling in the past month. South Korea has never seen so many critically ill patients, with 90% of ICU beds for Covid-19 patients occupied in the Seoul metropolitan area. Deaths are at record levels, doubling from last month.</p> <p>So limited now are hospital beds for Covid-19 patients that a pregnant woman, who had tested positive but was quarantining at home in a Seoul suburb, had to wait 10 hours to be admitted after she suddenly went into labor, a local emergency official said.</p> <p>Some OECD countries with similar vaccination rates to South Korea’s have also been forced to reinstitute restrictions amid fresh outbreaks. Portugal, where 89% of the population has gotten two Covid-19 shots, is requiring remote work from next month, while a negative test result is needed to enter nightclubs, bars and</p>

nursing homes, even for vaccinated people. Ireland, where 76% of the population is fully vaccinated, recently introduced a midnight curfew on bars, restaurants and nightclubs.

The U.K. recently imposed a work-from-home order and [a requirement for proof of vaccination](#) to attend nightclubs and some other indoor venues, as the government warned Omicron was rapidly spreading there.

“Vaccination alone is not enough to prevent the spread of infections,” said Ben Cowling, head of the epidemiology and biostatistics division at the University of Hong Kong’s School of Public Health.

It was just six weeks ago that South Korean officials felt confident enough to start the era of “[living with Covid](#),” as they put it. Businesses could stay open as long as they liked. Limits on private gatherings were lifted. Officials even held out the possibility of ending mask mandates if enough of the population got vaccinated.

Now, South Korea is warning daily infections could soon surpass 10,000 and possibly triple by next month, a senior health official said Thursday. The number of critically ill patients could roughly double from today, hitting about 2,000 in a worst-case scenario, the official added.

South Korea’s moves to lower hospitalizations and slow infections have attracted criticism on a variety of fronts. Earlier this month, civic groups filed a petition to South Korea’s human-rights watchdog, arguing that it was unconstitutional to penalize unvaccinated teens.

In February, teens who don’t get fully vaccinated will be blocked from libraries, after-school academies and many other public facilities that require a digital “vaccine pass” to enter. At a recent protest, Lee Yeon-jin said she was worried that her 12-year-old daughter was too young to get a Covid-19 vaccination.

“The government is threatening our children’s right to learn by imposing these measures,” said Ms. Lee, who is fully vaccinated herself.

South Korean health officials cited scientific research that vaccinations prevent serious illness and deaths by up to 90%, while lowering infection risks.

Just 0.2% of fully vaccinated people have experienced [breakthrough infections](#) in South Korea. Meanwhile, 99% of teenagers who were infected hadn’t been vaccinated, health officials have said.

On Thursday, South Korean Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum, explaining the return of restrictions, said the country was facing a “virus crisis.”

“We determined that we will be able to overcome this critical moment only if we quickly bring the spread under control through strong social-distancing measures,” Mr. Kim said.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Administration revs up trucker recruitment
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/white-house-revs-up-trucker-recruitment-drive-11639648803?mod=hp_minor_pos13
GIST	<p>The Biden administration unveiled a plan aimed at boosting the number of commercial truck drivers as part of a broader push to unclog supply-chain bottlenecks.</p> <p>Administration officials on Thursday said the plan aims to get more drivers on the road in the coming months by making it easier and faster for them to get certified and by jump-starting or expanding apprenticeship programs through carriers and other employers with trucking fleets. Overland Park, Kan.-based trucker Yellow Corp. and grocery chain Albertsons Cos. are among the companies that have committed to such programs.</p>

The plan also aims to improve industry retention and the quality of trucking jobs, senior administration officials said.

The Transportation and Labor departments will examine how drivers are paid—a sore spot for truckers who often [spend hours waiting to pick up or unload freight](#)—and investigate truck-leasing programs that administration officials said prey on drivers. The agencies will also get feedback from industry groups and labor unions.

The programs aren't likely to have an immediate impact on bottlenecks tied to scarce trucking capacity and labor-strapped distribution hubs as a flood of imports [overwhelms domestic logistics networks](#). But officials said the plan would help address pandemic-driven delays in getting commercial driver's licenses and tackle longstanding challenges in the profession such as high turnover, demonstrating the administration's support for drivers and the trucking industry, which moves more than 70% of domestic freight.

The initiative proposes to bolster efforts across government agencies and private-sector employers to expand the recruitment pipeline, officials said. They said it would support workforce-development programs, including some in the roughly \$1 trillion infrastructure package signed last month, aimed at attracting more veterans, women and young people to the profession.

The trucking industry has long churned through drivers, especially for long-haul work that keeps workers away from home for long stretches. The pandemic has exacerbated the problem, [making on-the-job conditions harder](#) and prompting some drivers to leave the industry for other work that pays better or has more-regular hours.

The American Trucking Associations, an industry group, has said the sector is some 80,000 drivers short of the labor force needed to keep goods moving freely this year. The driver population is aging, and women account for about 8% of all truck drivers, the group said.

The infrastructure bill included a provision to set up a pilot program [allowing some 18- to 20-year-olds to drive](#) big rigs across state lines, a job now limited to drivers 21 and older. Highway-safety advocates say that could make roads more dangerous.

The ATA backed that provision, along with others in the package aimed at promoting the recruitment and retention of women in the trucking industry and boosting transportation-sector diversity. The group on Thursday called the Biden administration's plan "a robust training opportunity for future commercial truck drivers" and said apprenticeships would help people enter the profession without incurring substantial debt.

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters, which represents truck drivers at companies including Yellow Corp., [ArcBest](#) Corp's ABF Freight System Inc. and [United Parcel Service](#) Inc., said it would work with the Biden administration to get more employers to adopt the apprenticeship model.

Some truck drivers say there isn't a shortage of people certified to drive trucks. They say [many leave the industry](#) after only a few years on the job because of low pay and poor working conditions.

The Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association, which represents small fleets and drivers that own or operate individual heavy-duty trucks, said Thursday that attracting and training new drivers won't solve the larger problem of retention, though the group supports some elements of the plan such as the driver-compensation analysis.

Trucking companies have been [raising driver wages](#) in an effort to boost recruitment and retention, and expanding training programs aimed at funneling new drivers into their fleets. The sector added 5,600 jobs in November in the sixth straight month of gains, according to seasonally adjusted Labor Department data, bringing overall payrolls closer to pre-pandemic levels, though trucking capacity remains tight on robust transportation demand.

	<p>Thursday's actions mark the latest effort from the Biden administration to address supply-chain problems. The administration has coordinated with ports; major transportation companies; lumber, semiconductor and other producers; and retailers.</p> <p>While there has been some easing, problems persist. The backup of container ships waiting to unload at the California ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach keeps getting bigger, for example, hitting a record Wednesday of 102 vessels.</p> <p>The administration has been eager to demonstrate steps it has taken, though officials have also stressed that the supply chain is largely run by the private sector. The administration has also raised questions of price gouging, prompting some pushback from the business community.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Airports \$77.5M infrastructure funding
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3285042/washington-airports-infrastructure-funding/
GIST	<p>Washington state's 59 airports are about to receive a major boost.</p> <p>The U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Aviation Administration announced it will award an estimated \$77.5 million to Washington's airports through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. The money can be invested in runways, taxiways, safety and sustainability projects, as well as terminal, and airport-transit connections, and roadway projects.</p> <p>This is the first of five annual rounds of funding the state will receive.</p> <p>Sea-Tac International Airport is set to receive about \$45 million, Spokane International will get more than \$6 million, Paine Field in Everett will be getting about \$3 million, as will Tri-Cities, and Bellingham International will get just under \$3 million. The rest of the commercial airports in the state will receive between \$1-2 million. An additional 47 reliever and general aviation airports in Washington are also expected to receive funding during the first year.</p> <p>The money comes from the Airport Infrastructure Grant program, one of three new aviation programs created by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which provides \$15 billion over five years for this program.</p> <p>Senators Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell helped pass the law and to include \$25 billion nationwide for airports to address repair and maintenance backlogs, reduce congestion and emissions near ports and airports, and drive electrification and other low-carbon technologies.</p> <p>"As Washington state families are flying again in greater and greater numbers, it's critical that our airports can keep people and goods going where they need to," Sen. Murray said in a written statement.</p> <p>"Washington state's airports are absolutely vital to our regional economies and this long overdue infrastructure investment will help keep passengers on planes and shipments in the skies, while also cutting harmful emissions."</p> <p>"Washington airports are continuing to grow, and getting much needed infrastructure dollars to help secure future capacity is important," Sen. Cantwell said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Health One builds momentum South Seattle
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3284967/911-alternate-response-health-one-south-seattle/
GIST	<p>A homeless man walks into Fire Station 5 — cold, COVID-positive, and without medicine to treat his diabetes. In another time, Seattle Fire Department was ill-equipped to assist him. Wednesday, Seattle's Health One relocated him into a crisis center, providing all new prescriptions for his diabetes and intake for COVID treatment.</p>

[Health One](#) is the city's mobile response team designed to integrate clients who often require emergency attention into long-term, structural resources to best provide requisite care. While traditional firefighters immediately respond to crisis situations, Health One works more deliberately, identifying medical or mental health care, shelter, or other social service solutions to non-emergency situations.

Health One's third iteration is coming to the Mount Baker neighborhood in early 2022, providing those services to Seattle residents south of Pioneer Square.

"Our unit is a deliberately designed program to serve the most vulnerable, most marginalized, and most underserved population," Jon Ehrenfeld, program manager with SFD's mobile, integrated health program, told MyNorthwest.

The services that Ehrenfeld's team provide are well encapsulated in recent care given to a caller who had fallen in his apartment, unable to stand. Upon emergency dispatch's arrival, they noticed his apartment was in disarray, posing a variety of hazards and risk to the gentleman. They determined he was no longer able to live by himself.

Health One, over the course of a month, assessed his needs and helped transition him into an assisted living facility, where he now resides.

Ehrenfeld intends for Health One to provide similar resources to the city's southside. The location at Mount Baker was chosen for a variety of reasons, primary among them the frequency with which emergency services are requested in places like Pioneer Square, Beacon Hill, and Rainier Valley.

He anticipates the crew, which consists of two firefighters and one case manager, will encounter similar problems to that of the other two units, which primarily serve the downtown area but have discretion to service the entire city.

The issue is namely a lack of "receiving locations," something which refers to treatment facilities other than hospital rooms. That could include anything from emergency shelters and crisis centers to detox facilities.

"We are just really short on them in the city, and it often is extremely difficult for my team on Health One to place people in shelters, clinics with availability," Ehrenfeld continued.

"Finding places for people that are having behavioral health emergencies who need detox or recovery is a consistent issue that we come upon," he said. "Frankly, I do anticipate that we will see similar things with future triage events. I know a lot of work is being done on the city, county, or state level, so we're we're cautiously optimistic."

Those resources will come in part with Mayor Jenny Durkan's recently announced Triage One proposal. Seattle City Council's 2022 budget allocates \$1.9 million in funding for the program, which will serve as adjunct to Seattle Police Department. It's predicated on a report from the mayor's office that determined up to 12% of calls SPD received between 2017 and 2019 did not require the attention of an armed officer.

"Not every call to 911 requires an armed response," Councilmember Lisa Herbold said in a July press event. "The specialized triage response model proposal is both creative thinking and a data-informed innovation, providing a qualified response to folks who require assistance but do not represent a threat."

The mayor's office reports that, through November, the Health One team received 1,763 internal referrals and accepted 1,147 (65%) of those for direct response or indirect care coordination.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Africa faces fallout in US supply chain crisis
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/12/16/supply-chain-crisis-africa/

As the world's largest cargo ships rush to the United States with all the clothes, furniture, toys and electronics that American consumers might want, Aditya Awtani is feeling neglected.

The chief executive of Mega Garment Industries Kenya, which supplies brands such as Calvin Klein and Izod, sometimes must wait more than two months — twice as long as usual — for shipments of the imported Chinese fabric he needs to make clothes in his high-ceilinged factory in Mombasa, Kenya.

Awtani's problems getting raw materials into Kenya are mirrored by his troubles getting Mega shirts, pants and children's clothing out of the country. Shipping containers are scarce, since carriers often hurry them back to China, making it hard to plan and easy to miss scheduled deliveries.

The shipping headaches, along with freight costs that have nearly quadrupled, are carving a hole in his profits, straining his relations with customers and threatening his 5,800 employees' jobs.

"There are days when I walk into the factory and I see workers with their arms folded because the containers have not come, which is a very depressing sight to see," Awtani said.

With U.S. retailers willing to pay almost any price to get their goods to American shores in time for the holidays, ocean carriers have redeployed container ships from the developing world to the more lucrative Asia-to-United States trade lanes, where rates for some shipments this fall were 15 times pre-pandemic levels, according to the Freightos index.

That's helped fill American store shelves — and carriers' coffers — but it has battered many African shippers, according to interviews with more than 30 maritime analysts, shippers, freight forwarders and cargo carriers in the United States, Africa and elsewhere.

Already lagging in coronavirus vaccinations, Africa risks becoming collateral damage in the supply wars. The International Monetary Fund says the 45 nations of sub-Saharan Africa are mired in the slowest economic recovery of any region, with supply chain disruptions helping fuel inflation at roughly twice its pre-pandemic level.

"Africa, sadly, I can't think of any other continent that is last on the rung. Africa will be the last to come out of this," Awtani said.

African shippers' struggles have their roots in the seaborne traffic jam off the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, Calif. With American consumers on a year-long shopping binge, record amounts of cargo are pouring into the United States, straining supply lines and sending freight costs soaring.

The resulting port congestion means it takes longer for each cargo ship, some carrying nearly 18,000 shipping containers, to make the round trip between China and the United States' West Coast.

Instead of pulling directly into an unloading berth, ships now wait at anchor in the California sunshine for two weeks or more. Just to maintain the pre-pandemic frequency of service on a given route, such as Shanghai to Los Angeles, ocean carriers need to use more ships.

But at a time when more ships are needed, Africa is seeing fewer, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), which tracks worldwide port calls by all types of vessels.

Starting this summer, cargo carriers redeployed shipping capacity to keep up with surging trans-Pacific demand. Tonnage devoted to carrying goods from ports in countries such as China, Vietnam and Thailand to North America rose by 17 percent over the past year, according to Alphaliner, an information and research firm.

As carriers devoted more resources to delivering Asian goods to Americans, shipping tonnage assigned to serve African ports fell by 10 percent, Alphaliner said, with the sharpest decline occurring in the number

of larger vessels. Mediterranean Shipping Company, for example, withdrew ships capable of carrying 13,000 20-foot containers apiece from its African routes and moved them to the Pacific.

African nations, including Kenya, Guinea, Angola and Namibia, also lost direct connections to some foreign countries, leaving their shippers reliant upon more expensive services that connect through a third port.

“You don’t want a problem in one region to be global and yet this is what we have been experiencing,” said Antonella Teodoro, a transport economist at MDS Transmodal, a consultancy based in the United Kingdom. “The global supply chain problem actually is not global; it’s the U.S. ... American consumers are consuming more.”

From the outset of the pandemic, the supply chain crisis has been easier on the big and wealthy than the small and poor. For instance, many large companies in the United States have been better able to cope with supply challenges than their smaller rivals, and overall, rich countries are navigating the disruptions more easily than developing countries.

“The rich countries are the least impacted,” said Frank Appel, CEO of Deutsche Post DHL Group. “We see delays in getting some products. It’s not that we don’t get the products.”

David Malpass, president of the World Bank, this fall said per-person income was growing 10 times as fast in the advanced economies as in the developing world, where the economic outlook is “grim.”

Africa’s place on the periphery of global production makes it a lower priority for the world’s cargo carriers. In Kenya, manufacturers are “highly vulnerable to global supply-chain disruptions and external shocks,” due to their dependence upon foreign raw materials, a September study by KPMG and the Kenya Association of Manufacturers concluded.

Unreliable shipping links forced at least three companies in recent months to close or to interrupt work, including a local maker of chocolate bars that has repeatedly idled its factory for a week or two after struggling to obtain consistent shipments of glucose syrup from India, according to Phyllis Wakiaga, KAM’s chief executive.

Shifting vessels to meet demand is nothing new. But after a decade of surplus shipping capacity, the pandemic recovery means global carriers are effectively presiding over a zero-sum situation. Adding capacity on one route inevitably disadvantages shippers on another.

“Redeployment of tonnage never led to shortages,” Jan Tiedemann, senior shipping line and port analyst for Alphaliner, said. “The difference this time around is the market is sold out. There’s no more ships.”

The number of container ships calling at African ports fell 2 percent during the first half of this year compared to the same period in 2019, according to UNCTAD.

But that figure masks differences among regions and vessel sizes.

Visits to ports in North Africa, which operate as regional hubs, actually rose by 9 percent in the first half of this year while East African port calls dropped 26 percent, according to UNCTAD, which tracks only vessels that carry 3,000 twenty-foot equivalent units (TEU) or more.

Including the smaller ships that are more common in many parts of Africa, Mombasa is still receiving as many vessels as it was two years ago, according to the Kenya Ports Authority, a state corporation.

Yet ultimately, the number of vessels calling at a port is not as important economically as the amount of cargo moving through it.

On a recent weekday, the Mombasa facility, which traces its heritage as a trading center to the 1700s, displayed none of the congestion that has afflicted ports in the United States, Europe and Asia. Several cranes were idle. Empty berths awaited container ships. And large swaths of the yard stood vacant.

During the third quarter, the port handled 7 percent fewer containers than it did during the same period in 2019, KPA said.

Inside Mega Garment's Mombasa warehouse, cardboard boxes destined for U.S. customers are stacked 12 feet high. Delays in obtaining fabric, zippers and buttons from factories in China, Thailand and Taiwan have made Mega late with some deliveries, forcing Awtani to sell goods that have missed their seasonal window at a deep discount.

"Every process is linked to when the raw material comes to the factory," he said. "A month in our business is a lot of time. That's when seasons change, literally ... If we miss, say, a Christmas season or a back-to-school season, what do you do with that merchandise? I can't sell winter jackets in May."

Making matters worse, Kenya's tax system, which imposes a 16 percent value-added tax (VAT) on the value of imports, including freight costs, means his customs fees rise in lockstep with his shipping costs. So far this year, the one-two punch has cost him around \$518,000, eating deep into his profit margins.

The chronic disruptions are chilling Mega's growth. Awtani often uses trucks to import some Ethiopian fabrics because the week-long, 1,000-mile land journey is more predictable than the less expensive sea route. If shipping were more reliable, Awtani said, he would increase his weekly container order by 25 percent.

Another apparel maker, Hela Clothing, which relied on a weekly container ship to send Asian fabrics and threads from its home base in Colombo, Sri Lanka, to Mombasa, went an entire month this fall without seeing a vessel, according to Nevil Dayananda, the company's deputy general manager.

Vessels that originate in Shanghai, able to hold almost 30,000 TEUs, are already full when they reach Colombo. So they skip the port, he said.

"They view the priority as USA for cargo," added Dayananda, whose factories supply U.S. brands including Victoria's Secret.

GridX Africa, after suffering months-long delays in getting seaborne deliveries of Chinese parts for its solar power installations, began using more expensive airfreight to bring in European alternatives. The solar power company also has been forced to truck its batteries to Kenya from a new supplier in South Africa, a journey of more than 2,500 miles that crosses five national borders, rather than continue importing Chinese models.

"You have fewer vessels coming to the Eastern African ports. You have smaller vessels coming to the Eastern Africa ports," said Philipo Mollel, GridX project coordinator. "You find it more difficult to get vessels and to find containers because now most containers are stuck at a port in the U.S. or Europe."

Snarled supply lines have been good for cargo carriers. Six of the largest publicly traded shipping lines made more than \$20.1 billion in profits during the 90 days that ended Sept. 30. Maersk, the industry's largest player, earned \$5.4 billion during the quarter, more than Tesla and Walmart combined.

For competitive reasons, most carriers provide little public detail about specific deployment decisions.

In late October, Maersk said it was boosting capacity on its Asia-to-U.S. routes by 40 percent by redeploying ships. Earlier, Hapag-Lloyd CEO Rolf Habben Jansen told reporters that the German carrier had shifted a low "double-digit number of ships" to the trans-Pacific by cutting the frequency of service in the Mediterranean and Caribbean.

“It hasn’t added a lot of productive capacity because routes are taking a lot longer,” Habben Jansen said. “If a service needed six ships, now it needs eight. So these ships are there to try to keep up capacity more than to add to it.”

Indeed, one out of every eight container ships in the global fleet is unavailable because it is stuck in or near one of the world’s ports, according to Sea Intelligence, a Copenhagen-based consultancy. That explains why ships appear in port as scheduled only one-third of the time, down from almost 80 percent two years ago.

Most African ports lack the depth and facilities to handle the ultra-large vessels that shuttle between California and Asia. So rather than switch vessels from Africa to the trans-Pacific, carriers have reduced the capacity available to African shippers by assigning smaller ships to ports like Mombasa. For one service by the French carrier CMA CGM that stops at the Kenyan docks, the average vessel capacity has fallen by 22 percent since the beginning of 2020, according to Teodoro.

Smaller cargo carriers that specialize in intra-Asian transport, such as Xpress Feeders of Singapore, also have shifted some smaller vessels to the booming trans-Pacific, according to Tiedemann, setting in motion schedule changes that ripple around the globe.

“Carriers have redeployed ships according to where rates are the highest,” said Tiedemann. “It’s a big game of musical chairs.”

Two-thirds of the roughly 70 vessels stuck outside the top U.S. import gateway in Southern California belong to those smaller carriers, according to Gene Seroka, executive director of the port of Los Angeles.

Many of the new players sail from China without a reservation at a L.A. terminal and thus go to the end of the floating queue. Some are ships that freight forwarders charter for big retailers such as Walmart or Home Depot.

Like many African economies, Kenya imports several times as many containers as it exports. Traditionally, that meant there were plenty of empties available for the country’s exporters to ship coffee, tea and apparel to foreign customers.

But carriers are rushing containers back to Asia as fast as possible to capitalize on the profit opportunities there. As a result, some impatient African shippers are switching to more expensive airfreight for high-value goods or less efficient bulk shipments for goods such as scrap metal, dog food or coffee.

“With container shortages, they do tend to give more preference to the U.S. and then we kind of get left behind,” said Raj Bains, chief executive of Kim Fay, a Nairobi-based manufacturer of household goods such as Huggies diapers and Duracell batteries.

The supply chain disruptions are also making themselves felt on Nairobi’s Biashara Street, where shopkeepers decry high freight costs, shipping delays and the resultant price increases.

Kenya’s inflation rate has topped 6 percent for the past five months, the longest it’s been above that mark in four years, according to the Central Bank of Kenya.

Sarvesh Shah, who owns Haria Stamp Shop with his brother Rahul, is waiting until shipping costs dip before placing new orders with his Chinese suppliers. The 80-year old business, which relies on Chinese factories for most of its Kenyan-themed fabrics, baseball caps, key holders and refrigerator magnets, has been selling off inventory that accumulated during the pandemic slowdown last year.

Shah checks almost every day to see if he can afford to replenish his supplies.

	“I speak to my local shipping agent to find out when he thinks prices of containers will start going down so we can place the order,” says Shah. “We’re just waiting for freight costs to come down by 30 percent from where they are now.”
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HEADLINE	12/16 Startling rise virus infections in NYC
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/16/nyregion/new-york-covid-cases.html
GIST	<p>Holiday plans abruptly reversing, restaurants closing, Broadway shows going dark while, blocks away, long lines form outside testing sites — it’s as if it were 2020 all over again.</p> <p>The startling rise in coronavirus infections has whiplashed New York City and the surrounding region. Once more, most everyone seems to know someone who is infected.</p> <p>Millions of people who have followed the city’s guidelines and received two or even three vaccination shots, who have in recent weeks and months enjoyed a return to many of their old practices — riding the subway, dining indoors, partying with friends — face an uncertain future.</p> <p>“It’s scary — it feels like we’ve been here before,” said Emma Clippinger, 36, waiting in a long line outside a testing site in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, on Thursday. “It feels like last year, last winter, despite the vaccines and despite the boosters, and it’s the same game plan, but it also feels like we get defeated often.”</p> <p>New York City and the surrounding Northeast, the epicenter of the coronavirus’s arrival in 2020, is being buffeted by a new surge in infections that seems poised to disrupt the long awaited return to normalcy. New case reports in New York State have skyrocketed nearly 60 percent in the last two weeks.</p> <p>“It is clear that the Omicron variant is here in New York City in full force,” Mayor Bill de Blasio said on Thursday.</p> <p>Deidre Depke, 59, waiting in line for a test on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, didn’t need the mayor to tell her. “Monday I wasn’t even thinking about it,” she said, “and Thursday I’m in a panic.”</p> <p>An average of more than 10,600 infections were being identified each day in New York State, more than any other state, and hospitalizations were also increasing, although more slowly. The city’s test positivity rate doubled in just three days, up to 7.8 percent on Sunday compared with 3.9 percent the previous Thursday, raising alarm bells among city officials and residents alike.</p> <p>The number of new cases reported statewide on Thursday alone — 18,276, more than 8,300 of them in New York City — was the highest since at least January. Hospitalizations, though, remain at a fraction of what they were in the city’s deadly first virus wave, with about 1,000 people hospitalized in New York City now, compared to more than 15,000 at the peak in April 2020.</p> <p>It remains unknown to what extent Omicron will cause serious illness. Scientists believe that vaccines will still provide protection against the worst outcomes, and boosters are likely to provide additional protection against infection, preliminary data suggests.</p> <p>The public health picture in other states was also growing bleaker. Connecticut is averaging more than 2,600 new cases a day, up from about 330 at the start of November, and Rhode Island is adding cases at the highest rate in the nation. Michigan, Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania have the highest rates of coronavirus hospitalizations.</p> <p>In Rhode Island, Dr. Wilfredo Giordano-Perez, who sits on the governor’s vaccine committee, said the number of people scaling back holiday plans still seemed fairly small. “I wish I was hearing more of that,” he said. “I think people are going to take their chances, with this idea that they’ve done everything they can do up until this point.”</p>

In New York, Mayor de Blasio announced six steps to address the surge, including expanding the hours and capacity of testing sites, distributing one million free KN95 masks and 500,000 home tests through community organizations, stepping up enforcement of mask and vaccine mandates at businesses and encouraging more New Yorkers to get boosters.

Only 1.5 million New Yorkers, or about 22 percent of adults, have gotten either a booster or an additional dose, according to city statistics. Meanwhile, 82 percent of adult New Yorkers are fully vaccinated.

“We have seen a very substantial increase in Covid cases in the last few days,” Mr. de Blasio said on Thursday.

“People need to get vaccinated right now, get that booster right now,” he added. “If they are not feeling well, get tested right now. It’s an urgent situation.”

At-home testing kits, piled high just weeks ago with shoppers showing little interest, are selling out at some stores. The governor’s office on Thursday announced plans to create a system for residents to request that coronavirus tests be sent to their homes.

With a new year approaching, many corners of the city seemed to be sliding backward. Some restaurants have had to shut their doors, not because the city forced them to but because their staff members tested positive or were exposed to the virus, and there was no one to replace them.

Many Broadway shows, so soon after their celebrated return in September, have once again gone dark for limited stretches, often with hours’ notice, as cast or crew members test positive.

New York University canceled all “nonessential” gatherings, from holiday parties to graduation ceremonies, and strongly advised that finals be moved online. Cornell University declared a Code Red on its Ithaca, N.Y., campus, after more than 900 community members tested positive in a week, despite near-perfect vaccination rates. Companies have called off everything from Midtown Manhattan holiday parties to return-to-office timetables and in-person meetings.

Corporations including Citigroup and Apple are asking employees to work from home. JPMorgan Chase moved a January health care conference to online, while Goldman Sachs urged workers to cancel holiday parties.

New rules affect everyone — even the audiences for the Rockettes. The city will be sending inspectors to Radio City Music Hall and other venues to make sure that they are checking vaccination cards among children as young as 5, who need one dose of vaccine to attend indoor shows.

Gov. Kathy Hochul addressed the matter at a news conference Thursday. “We’re asking people to follow common sense. Get vaccinated, get boosted. Please don’t take a chance,” she said. “People have a right to stay alive, and the people that you affect have a right to live as well.”

Even though data has suggested that the unvaccinated remain most at risk, that was little comfort to vaccinated New Yorkers, watching the plans they’d waited so long to make evaporate as even vaccinated people test positive in breakthrough cases.

“It’s literally all I’ve been thinking about,” said Sarah Ganchar, a teacher at the New School, sitting in Madison Square Park with a bag of at-home testing kits she had just purchased. She said eight of her fully vaccinated friends had tested positive this week. “I’m really heartsick and worried. This to me feels like the day Broadway shut down, again.”

The old threat calculations surrounding family and friends are back: Do I go or do I stay home? Who else will be there, and are they at greater risk? Are they vaccinated — and does that really matter?

Ms. Clippinger's holiday plans in the city, including her mother's visit from Boston, are shifting beneath her feet.

"My mom is probably going to make her visit very short, just to kiss everyone and then go back to her partner," she said. "In the past it would have been museums and Broadway, and eating at all of our favorite restaurants — not this year."

Meera Ilahi, 22, took a test on Thursday after several of her friends attended the raucous, generally maskless Santa Con bar crawl on Saturday — even though she did not.

"I'm kind of nervous because a lot of people I know who went out this weekend are testing positive," she said as she waited to learn her own results. "And then on TikTok, I've been scrolling and like, every video I kept getting was like, 'I am in New York, and I have Covid.'"

The news brought to the fore familiar insecurities from the start of the pandemic. "I'm worried about financial stress, mostly," said Tristan Ramirez, a 23-year-old Washington Heights resident waiting for a test at the subway station on 72nd and Broadway. "If I get sick and have to take a lot of time off, I'm not going to get paid."

Vivienne Taylor, 62, a Queens resident, waited in a testing line hours before her scheduled flight to her hometown in Jamaica on Thursday evening. The airport and journey would be her last public outings for the time being, she said.

"I'm not going to be complacent," Ms. Taylor said. "I'm going to go home, I'm going to stay home and just keep to myself."

The fatigue of the pandemic — the worrying, then relief, then more worrying, and more masks — reaches all the way to the governor's office, as Ms. Hochul made clear on Thursday. She was asked when it would all end, and she took a deep breath, rubbed her hands together and looked skyward before answering with a seemingly forced smile.

"There is no person on this earth who can give an answer to the question, 'When will this end?'" she said. "Nor can I."

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HEADLINE	12/16 Crackdown: firms misusing biotechnology
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/16/us/politics/us-china-biotech-muslim-minorities.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The Biden administration said on Thursday that it would put limits on doing business with a group of Chinese companies and institutions it says are involved in misusing biotechnology to surveil and repress Muslim minorities in China and advancing Beijing's military programs.</p> <p>In announcing one set of the moves, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said China was employing biotechnology and medical innovation "to pursue control over its people and its repression of members of ethnic and religious minority groups."</p> <p>The administration said those efforts included the use of biometric facial recognition and large-scale genetic testing of residents 12 to 65 in the mostly Muslim region of Xinjiang.</p> <p>China has used such technology to track and control the Uyghurs, a predominately Muslim ethnic group.</p> <p>In a separate move, Facebook — now called Meta — warned 50,000 users that they may have been the targets of surveillance software, largely by firms that were working for nation-states, and some working for private clients. The company announced that it was banning from its social media sites seven commercial surveillance-for-hire services that target journalists, dissidents and human rights activists.</p>

One of the organizations is based in China, but several were Israeli. Last month, [the United States put Israel's best-known maker of surveillance software, the NSO Group](#), on the Commerce Department's "entities list," banning U.S. companies from selling technology to it and throwing the firm's financial survival into doubt.

In its announcement on Thursday, the Biden administration said Beijing was using advances in biotechnology to drive forward its military modernization. A senior administration official called out China's work to edit human genes for performance enhancement and create ways for human brains to connect more directly to machines.

In a coordinated action, the Treasury Department moved to block Americans from investing in securities related to eight Chinese companies — including the drone maker DJI — that the United States says are involved in the surveillance and tracking of the Uyghur minority.

DJI, the largest maker of consumer drones, is by far the most well-known of the companies targeted by the U.S. government on Thursday.

A company spokesman declined to comment on the action, which was [reported earlier by The Financial Times](#). When DJI was placed on the Commerce Department's entities list last year, the company said it had done nothing to justify the designation.

The Treasury Department said the company provided drones to the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau, which used them to surveil Uyghurs. The department's announcement suggested that DJI sold the drones to the security bureau, much as it has sold drones to American law enforcement.

The Commerce Department added 40 companies and institutions to its restricted entities list on Thursday, including [China's Academy of Military Medical Sciences and 11 of its research institutes](#), which are involved in using biotechnology for military purposes. Being added to the list restricts foreign businesses from gaining access to U.S. technology or working with American companies.

The companies that the department added to the list include Chinese companies that the U.S. government said were supporting Chinese military modernization, contrary to American national security.

The department also added to its list seven Chinese companies and six more from Turkey, Georgia and Malaysia that it said were trying to supply U.S. technology to Iran, items that could support Tehran's conventional weapons and missile programs.

"We cannot allow U.S. commodities, technologies, and software that support medical science and biotechnical innovation to be diverted toward uses contrary to U.S. national security," Ms. Raimondo said.

The moves by the administration came after a [report issued in the fall by the National Counterintelligence and Security Center](#), which highlighted China's advances in biotechnology and the country's misuses of those capabilities. In February, the center [warned in a bulletin](#) to hospitals and health care companies that concerns about China exploiting health care data "are not hypothetical."

Beijing, the bulletin said, "has a documented history of exploiting DNA for genetic surveillance and societal control of minority populations in Xinjiang."

Last year, the Commerce Department added 11 other companies involved in providing genetic analysis of Uyghurs to Beijing. That action included subsidiaries of the Chinese company BGI Group, which had developed a neonatal test in partnership with China's military that gave it access to the genetic data of millions of people around the world.

Building on those actions, the Biden administration has been putting pressure on Chinese companies involved in key technology sectors including biotechnology, artificial intelligence and autonomous drones.

It also placed SenseTime, a large artificial intelligence firm, on the entities list, forcing the Chinese company to [change its plans for an initial public offering](#). SenseTime's technology is being used in the facial recognition of Uyghurs, U.S. government officials said.

On Thursday, senior administration officials said the U.S. government was working to try to slow or stop the misuse of new technologies that undermine national security by denying China access to American capital markets and by trying to restrict its ability to use technology developed by U.S. companies.

American intelligence officials say China and the United States are in a biotechnology race, and the country that develops the best technology will have a global advantage.

Biotechnology advances are considered vital for battling future pandemics and developing cures or treatments for a variety of ailments. But American officials have said the technology is ripe for abuse, misuse and unethical behavior.

The Chinese government had not been as constrained by international norms as the United States and its allies. In addition to using the technology to control its population, Chinese government researchers have shown willingness to manipulate human genetics in a way American academics would find unethical, according to American officials.

In its announcement, Meta said a seven-month investigation had concluded that Facebook and Instagram accounts had been used to identify targets for surveillance and build online relationships with them that helped with the installation of surveillance software. Many of the targets were human rights workers or dissidents, but others were journalists and potential political adversaries.

Meta said it removed about 100 Facebook and Instagram accounts linked to "an unidentified entity in China" that was making surveillance software aimed at Apple and Android phones, and computers that ran Windows and Mac OS X, among other operating systems.

Among the seven companies Meta said it was banning from its services was one called Cytox, believed to be based in North Macedonia, which Meta said had been hired for work in countries allied with the United States — including Saudi Arabia, Oman, Germany and the Philippines. The statement left unclear whether the firm's clients were states, companies or private citizens.

Meta also said it removed 300 Facebook and Instagram accounts belonging to Black Cube, another Israeli-based firm with offices around Europe. The company is known for "social engineering," essentially working to gain the trust of a target for intelligence gathering.

The report said the company "operated fictitious personas tailored for its targets," with some posing as graduate students, human right workers, or film or television producers. They would then set up calls and get personal email addresses in an effort to get targets to click on links that put the surveillance software on their devices.

"There is an entire shadow industry out there that operates around the world," said Nathaniel Gleicher, Meta's head of security policy. "People focus on how they exploit vulnerabilities, but it's the deceptive things they do leading up to that exploitation which we also have to expose."

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HEADLINE	12/16 'Off the charts' Midwest storms; 5 dead
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/16/us/midwest-power-outage.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=US%20News
GIST	A ferocious storm system that swept across the Midwest left hundreds of thousands of customers without electricity on Thursday, with numerous houses, barns and buildings damaged and five people dead in Iowa, Kansas and Minnesota.

Less than a week after a string of deadly tornadoes devastated six states, Wednesday night brought weather that was extremely unusual for the Midwest at this time of year: 70-degree temperatures, wildfires, tornadoes and winds that surpassed 75 miles per hour.

“In the middle of December, it’s obviously extraordinary, unprecedented,” said Mike Fowle, a meteorologist for the National Weather Service, noting that the city of Des Moines broke a record by reaching a temperature of 74 degrees.

Before Wednesday, Mr. Fowle said, there had been only five confirmed tornadoes in the month of December in Iowa, dating back to 1950. On Wednesday alone, there were at least five tornadoes across the state.

Storm teams from the National Weather Service were crisscrossing the Midwest on Thursday surveying the damage, and the extent was still coming into full view.

The storm system, which was moving into Canada on Thursday, came five days after tornadoes whipped through Kentucky and five other states, [killing at least 88 people](#), which might have prompted many people in the Midwest to take a cautious approach when faced with storms on Wednesday night.

What prompted the unusual December weather events is unclear. The ingredients that give rise to tornadoes include warm, moist air at ground level; cool dry air higher up; and wind shear, which is the change in wind speed or direction. Each of these factors may be [affected differently by climate change](#).

Residents of communities across Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa were still struggling with widespread power outages on Thursday. Most were in Michigan, with more than 200,000 customers without power by the evening, [according to PowerOutage.us](#), which aggregates data from utilities across the country. Another 80,000 were still experiencing outages in Wisconsin.

In western Wisconsin, the Police Department of the city of Stanley wrote on Facebook that there was devastation throughout the community from storms overnight, with roofs of buildings sheared off by winds, streets filled with rubble and power lines downed. As emergency workers and residents worked to clean up on Thursday morning in 24-degree temperatures, a light snow began to fall, with wind gusts of 40 miles per hour predicted.

Deb Chwala, whose family owns a construction business in Stanley, said both of the company’s buildings were “totally flattened.” She was home on Wednesday evening when the storm hit and heard terrifying, howling winds, followed by a roaring sound that sounded like a tornado had descended on the town.

When she and her husband surveyed the damage, they were able to retrieve a computer and other belongings, but the buildings were beyond repair. “It looks like a bomb hit,” she said.

The National Weather Service confirmed on Thursday that a tornado had hit north of Neillsville, Wis., near Stanley.

Of the five deaths, four occurred on the roads. In Kansas, Trooper Mike Racy of the Highway Patrol said that three people had been killed in two separate car crashes on Wednesday, after dust storms had turned driving conditions dangerous.

“Our visibility yesterday was so bad, you could barely see the hood on your vehicle,” he said.

In Iowa, one man was killed after a gust of wind overturned his tractor-trailer on a highway.

Another man, a 65-year-old Minnesota resident, died when he stepped outside for a cigarette during a storm and was found a short time later with a head injury, pinned under a fallen 40-foot tree.

Return to Top	<p>The National Weather Service said there had been at least 55 wind gusts of at least 75 miles per hour across the country on Wednesday, the highest daily number since 2004.</p> <p>In the West and Plains regions, dust storms whipped through Colorado and Kansas, and a tornado was spotted in Lincoln, Neb. Images circulating on social media showed damage to hangars and small planes at the Santa Fe Regional Airport in New Mexico.</p> <p>The main air traffic control tower at Kansas City International Airport was temporarily evacuated early Wednesday evening because of the storms.</p> <p>In Iowa, transportation officials shut down bridges and warned drivers to stay off roads. And in Omaha, meteorologists for the Weather Service briefly suspended their work as they sheltered from a storm.</p> <p>The storm system also spawned wildfires in Kansas with winds of up to 100 m.p.h., the local authorities said.</p> <p>As storms moved through South Dakota, the Weather Service office in Sioux Falls issued its first tornado warning on record for the month of December.</p> <p>And in Iowa, where schools closed early and some areas saw wind gusts of up to 90 m.p.h., high temperatures reached the lower 70s. On average, high temperatures in December throughout much of the state are in the 30s, according to the Weather Service.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 DOJ halts settlement talks migrant families
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/16/us/biden-migrant-family-separation-settlement.html
GIST	<p>The Biden administration on Thursday pulled out of negotiations to offer financial compensation to thousands of migrant families for the harm inflicted on them by a Trump-era policy that separated parents and children at the border.</p> <p>Lawyers representing the families said that Justice Department lawyers had advised them that they were terminating negotiations to settle claims for damages and would instead go to court to determine any compensation due to individual families.</p> <p>Talks had stalled, they said, after a leak in late October suggested that up to \$450,000 could be paid to each of the families affected by the policy. The premature news, which was seized on by conservatives, complicated a nearly yearlong effort to compensate migrant families.</p> <p>However, the lawyers said that they had not expected the administration to walk out of the discussions entirely. The policy, they have argued, was developed at the highest levels of government with the goal of deterring migrants who were seeking entry into the United States, often to claim protection from gang violence in their home countries.</p> <p>“It’s shocking that the Biden administration would simply end negotiations without providing an opportunity for a settlement and would choose to defend this horrific practice publicly in court,” said Lee Gelernt of the American Civil Liberties Union, the lead counsel in the lawsuit that was brought to end the policy in 2018.</p> <p>A Justice Department spokeswoman, Dena Iverson, said in a statement that while the parties had been “unable to reach a global settlement,” the administration remained “committed to engaging with the plaintiffs and to bringing justice to the victims of this abhorrent policy.”</p> <p>Conservative leaders and commentators lambasted the administration for considering a large sum. Republicans, including some who had criticized the family separation policy, called the payments, or any payments, unwarranted.</p>

Senator Mitch McConnell, the Republican minority leader, accused President Biden of wanting to “literally make millionaires out of people who have violated federal law.”

Mr. Biden said reports of the \$450,000 maximum payment then under discussion were “garbage” when he was asked about it by a Fox News reporter. A few days later, he said that families should be compensated but that he did not know what amount might be appropriate.

“Obviously the Biden administration is caving to political pressure on immigration again instead of keeping its promise to do right by these families,” said Ann Garcia, a lawyer who represents several families subjected to the policy.

The family separations became emblematic of how far the Trump administration was willing to go to achieve its goal of halting the influx of migrants at the southwestern border.

In the spring of 2018, Jeff Sessions, the attorney general at the time, announced that the government would criminally prosecute everyone who crossed the border illegally, imprisoning parents and placing their children, some just months old, in shelters and foster homes across the country. This included families that had approached a port of entry to request asylum from persecution in their home countries, migrants who are supposed to have protection under the law.

The goal of the policy, officials said then, was to discourage the large number of Central American families that were making the perilous journey to the U.S. border, many of them fleeing violence in their countries.

Dr. Colleen Kraft, who was president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, said at the time that she was dismayed at the policy’s “sweeping cruelty.”

The separations were widely condemned not only by Democrats but also by some Republicans, including Senator Ted Cruz of Texas as well as Melania Trump and Laura Bush.

A federal judge in San Diego ordered the administration to reunify the families in June 2018, but by then many of the parents had been deported.

“This cruelty did not happen by accident,” said Mr. Gelernt, the A.C.L.U. lawyer. “Trump administration officials sat down and devised this as official U.S. policy, ordering that children be taken away day after day, no matter how young, some only 6 months old.”

All told, 5,500 families were identified as separated at the border, and Mr. Biden has promised to make amends for the “moral and national shame.”

Two distinct proceedings seeking to hold the government accountable for the policy have been unfolding this year, and the Biden administration had been trying to settle both.

In February, the White House established a task force led by Alejandro Mayorkas, the secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, to reunify separated families. It had been negotiating with the A.C.L.U. to settle a class-action lawsuit over the separations, to find families that remain separated, and to provide all the families a pathway to live in the United States permanently. Those talks continue.

In separate negotiations, lawyers representing separated families had been in discussions with Justice Department lawyers over financial compensation for the injuries caused by the policy. Hundreds of lawyers filed more than 900 claims against the government, but those settlement discussions have now been suspended with the Justice Department’s decision to go back to court, lawyers said.

In filings reviewed by The New York Times, the plaintiffs' lawyers accuse the government of negligence, torture and crimes against humanity. The claims describe emotional and physical abuse that occurred during the separations and trauma that, in many cases, still lingers.

In one such case, a 19-month-old child could not remember his father when they were reunited, and then exhibited anger, irritability and withdrawal, according to the complaint. He had passed through three foster families. Some children were sexually molested by staff members in shelters, according to some filings; many families said their children still suffer from sleeplessness, nightmares and digestive issues.

Most of the families have been reunited. The locations of about 270 parents remain unknown.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Harvard extends test-optional admissions
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/16/us/harvard-admissions-act-sat.html
GIST	<p>Harvard will not require SAT or ACT scores for admission through the next four years, extending a policy adopted during the coronavirus pandemic and adding fuel to the movement to permanently eliminate standardized test scores for admission to even the nation's most selective schools.</p> <p>Harvard attributed the move, announced on Thursday evening, to the pandemic, which has made it hard for students to get access to testing sites.</p> <p>But the decision has strong symbolic value, as it telegraphs that Harvard believes it can wade through thousands of applications and admit students without the aid of standardized test scores. It also signals that the university — and perhaps the nation — is one step closer to abolishing test scores from the admissions process altogether.</p> <p>“Students who do not submit standardized test scores will not be disadvantaged in their application process,” William Fitzsimmons, the dean of admissions and financial aid, said in a statement. He encouraged students to submit “whatever materials they believe would convey their accomplishments in secondary school and their promise for the future.”</p> <p>Standardized test scores have been a rite of passage for generations of high school students, and a bane of their existence. Supporters say that they provide a uniform way of evaluating students from different schools and different parts of the country.</p> <p>But critics have long argued that they are racially and culturally biased and do not reflect the true ability of many students, but instead their ability to pay for tutoring. An entire industry of test preparation companies now coaches students through the tests, charging hefty fees.</p> <p>Harvard's use of test scores has also been part of a lawsuit accusing it of discriminating against Asian American applicants by holding them to a higher standard than other prospective students. The lawsuit said that as a group, Asian American applicants scored higher than others on measures like standardized tests but were penalized by a subjective “personal” rating.</p> <p>A federal court and an appeals court have upheld Harvard's admissions process, finding that it was not discriminatory, and the Supreme Court is now considering whether to hear the case.</p> <p>The current admissions cycle is the second for which students have been able to apply to Harvard without standardized test scores. The new policy would extend that to the next four classes, through the classes of 2027, 2028, 2029 and 2030, beyond the foreseeable boundaries of the pandemic.</p> <p>Bob Schaeffer, head of FairTest, an anti-testing group, said that Harvard's prestige and outsize influence made the decision more significant, and that it could be a harbinger of a future in which standardized tests would play a much smaller role in college admissions, or even no role at all.</p>

“This proves that test-optional is the new normal in college admissions,” Mr. Schaeffer said. “Highly selective schools have shown that they can do fair and accurate admissions without test scores.”

The percentage of schools that do not require test scores has risen from about 45 percent before the pandemic to nearly 80 percent now, according to FairTest, or 1,815 of the 2,330 schools counted by the organization.

[Students flooded the most competitive colleges](#) with a record number of applications for the class of 2025, forcing the eight Ivy League schools to delay the date they announced their enrollment decisions. The surge was attributed in part to the many schools that had made test scores optional.

Harvard is hardly alone, and other major institutions have gone even further.

[The University of California system](#) made a final decision in November — after several years of debate — [to end the use of standardized testing](#). The system, influential because of its huge size and prestigious campuses, including in Berkeley and Los Angeles, had been searching for an alternative exam, but ultimately decided that high school grades were a better way to evaluate students.

The University of Chicago went test-optional in 2018, before the pandemic, and has reported the admission of a more diverse class without a standardized testing requirement.

A vast majority of schools that are not requiring testing are “test-optional” rather than “test-blind,” meaning that if students choose to submit a test score, the school will look at it. Test scores are also frequently used in determining scholarship awards.

The testing announcement came as Harvard College said it had accepted 740 students to the class of 2026 from a pool of 9,406 who applied under its early-action program. The student newspaper, The Crimson, [reported that the rate of 7.9 percent](#) was the second-most-competitive early admissions rate in Harvard’s history. Regular admissions will take place in the spring.

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HEADLINE	12/16 CDC prefers other vaccines over J&J
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/16/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#cdc-johnson-vaccine-blood-clot
GIST	<p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Thursday recommended that Covid vaccines other than Johnson & Johnson’s should be preferred, after its advisers cited increasing evidence that the company’s shots can trigger a rare blood clot disorder now linked to dozens of cases and at least nine deaths in the United States in the last year.</p> <p>The decision adopted a recommendation by an expert panel that effectively discouraged vaccine providers and adults from using Johnson & Johnson’s shot. New data showed that there was a higher risk for the blood clotting condition than previously known. The risk was greatest among women aged 30 to 49, estimated at 1 in 100,000 who had received the company’s shot.</p> <p>Johnson & Johnson’s vaccine is not being removed from the market. It will remain an option for people who are “unable or unwilling” to receive the more popular shots from Moderna or Pfizer-BioNTech, the agency said.</p> <p>The recommendation is the latest setback for a vaccine which has largely fallen out of favor in the United States. The company’s vaccine has not fulfilled its early promise as a traditional, one-and-done format that would be easy to deploy in more isolated or rural communities, and among people skittish about receiving two doses.</p> <p>About 16 million people in the United States have received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine as their primary immunization, compared to 73 million fully immunized with Moderna’s vaccine and 114 million</p>

with the Pfizer-BioNTech shots. Among Americans who have received a booster, just 1.6 percent chose Johnson & Johnson.

Earlier this week, the Food and Drug Administration issued updated guidance on the risks of the blood-clotting disorder linked to Johnson & Johnson's vaccine, but reiterated that the benefits outweighed its risks.

Dozens of countries have authorized Johnson & Johnson's vaccine and have been using it as part of their immunization campaigns. But while it remains in high demand in some parts of the world, it has lost popularity in many countries because of safety concerns and its relative lower effectiveness against Covid.

Some governments have already moved to put restrictions on Johnson & Johnson's shot because of the blood clotting risk. Finland, Denmark and Slovenia stopped using it, and several other nations have ranked it lower for use than Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna's vaccines. Some countries also have advised doctors to counsel women under 50 of the potential risk.

The C.D.C. panel's recommendation lands in the midst of a surge in virus cases driven by the Delta coronavirus variant and Omicron, the latest version that has already become dominant in some countries and is spreading fast in Britain and the United States.

Several laboratory experiments suggest that a single dose of Johnson & Johnson's shot may offer little defense against infection with Omicron. The company said late last month that it was testing blood samples from clinical trial participants who have received its shot as a booster to see how their vaccine-induced antibodies fare against Omicron.

At Thursday's meeting of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, C.D.C. officials went into detail on the clotting-related syndrome identified in 54 people in the United States who received the shot before the end of August. Overall, the rate of the condition was 3.8 cases per one million people given the vaccine.

People who received a Johnson & Johnson shot months ago are not thought to be at risk for the clotting condition, since the onset of symptoms typically occurred about nine days after vaccination in the diagnosed cases.

An increased risk for the condition has also been linked to the shot from AstraZeneca, which is not authorized in the United States. It has not been linked to the Moderna or Pfizer vaccines.

Evidence has increasingly shown that one dose of Johnson & Johnson's shot offers much less protection against infection than other vaccines. Federal health officials in October authorized boosters for people who had received a single shot of the company's vaccine at least two months earlier. They allowed for a "mix and match" approach, allowing people to get a second shot of a Pfizer or Moderna vaccine.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Omicron worries: virus cases jumping
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/16/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#amid-worries-about-omicron-virus-cases-are-jumping-across-the-united-states
GIST	<p>Offices are canceling holiday parties. Broadway performances are being shuttered because of breakthrough infections among the casts. College finals are being moved online, and some colleges and universities are switching back to remote instruction after the winter break, at least for a time.</p> <p>Coronavirus cases are spiking again in New York City, beyond anything seen since last winter, and in much of the United States, where the Delta variant remains by far the dominant version. The country is reporting more than 120,000 new cases a day on average, according to a New York Times database — a 40 percent increase from two weeks ago, and 70 percent more than when cases stopped falling in early November.</p>

While most people who are unvaccinated remain at much higher risk, a combination of factors — widespread transmission, waning immunity and the circulation of highly infectious variants — [has led to breakthrough infections among the vaccinated](#).

Several new laboratory studies indicate that vaccines, and especially boosters, may offer substantial protection against [the worst outcomes](#) from the fast-spreading Omicron coronavirus variant. Still, the new variant will infect many people who have been vaccinated or recovered from older versions of the virus, according to the research.

The United States passed two milestones this week — [50 million total known cases](#) and [800,000 total deaths](#) — and experts say the addition of Omicron is likely to push the trajectory up even more. So will the holiday season, public health officials say, as people travel and families gather indoors, where the virus spreads most readily.

Outbreaks are growing most severely around the Great Lakes and in the Northeast. Connecticut is averaging more than 2,600 new cases a day, up from about 330 at the start of November, and Rhode Island is adding cases at the highest rate in the country. Michigan, Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania have the highest rates of coronavirus hospitalizations.

In some hard-hit states, federal medical workers have been sent to help exhausted hospital staff. About 68,000 coronavirus patients are hospitalized nationwide, a 21 percent increase from two weeks ago, but well below the levels seen over the summer and at last winter's peak.

Biden administration officials are bracing for a potential wave of Omicron infections that could overwhelm the health care system. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [warned recently that the percentage of coronavirus cases in the United States](#) caused by Omicron had increased sharply and might portend a surge in infections as soon as next month.

The administration is trying to encourage all Americans who are eligible — those 16 and older who received their second Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine dose at least six months ago, or the single-dose Johnson & Johnson shot at least two months ago — to get a booster.

Across the country, cultural institutions and many ordinary Americans are reconsidering what is safe. The Metropolitan Opera [announced on Wednesday](#) that, starting next month, it would require booster shots for all eligible employees and audience members. The [N.F.L.](#) and [N.B.A.](#) are discussing changes to their protocols in response to a wave of infections among players. Some Wall Street banks [are telling workers who had been going into the office to stay home over the holidays](#).

Similar surges, and accompanying crackdowns, are happening in many countries, especially in Europe. The French government on Thursday [banned nonessential travel to and from Britain and tightened testing requirements for travelers](#), as a record-breaking surge of Omicron cases in Britain raised worries that France would soon face a similar tsunami of new infections.

As of Thursday, an average of 3,700 new cases per day were being reported in New York City, a level not seen since early April. New York State, which reports cases before the city does, showed caseloads skyrocketing further, with more than [18,000 new cases on Thursday, 8,300 of them in New York City](#) — levels not seen since the holiday spike last January.

New York's governor, Kathy Hochul, announced that the state would let New Yorkers in areas with low vaccination rates and high case numbers [request home delivery of rapid tests](#), and Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York City announced a six-step plan to combat the surge, including more testing and enforcement of mask mandates.

Officially, the city's monitoring system had only picked up the Omicron variant in about 1 percent of cases it has analyzed as of the week of December 4. But the C.D.C. recently reported in that in the region

	<p>encompassing New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, about 13 percent of cases were Omicron.</p> <p>“We have seen a very substantial increase in Covid cases in the last few days. It is clear that the omicron variant is here in New York City in full force,” Mayor Bill de Blasio said on Thursday.</p> <p>Sarah Gancher, a teacher at The New School who lives in Queens, said eight of her friends who were fully vaccinated had tested positive this week. The speed at which cases have surged has frightened her, she said.</p> <p>“It’s literally all I’ve been thinking about,” Ms. Gancher said.</p> <p>Sitting on a bench in Madison Square Park in Manhattan on Thursday morning, she opened her bag to show the five at-home testing kits she had just bought. Several holiday parties she had planned to attend this weekend had been canceled, and although she had tickets booked to fly home to California to visit her family, she said she wasn’t sure how safe that would be anymore.</p> <p>“I’m really heartsick and worried,” she said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Army, Navy to dismiss vaccine holdouts
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/16/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#vaccine-holdouts-in-the-army-and-navy-will-be-dismissed-military-says
GIST	<p>The vast majority of active-duty troops in the Army and Navy are vaccinated against the coronavirus, and the small number of those still refusing shots will soon be dismissed from the military, officials said Thursday.</p> <p>In the Army, 468,459 active-duty soldiers, or 98 percent, have received at least one dose of the vaccine. The Navy has inoculated 342,974 members, with roughly 1.7 percent still holding out. Among the unvaccinated, however, are some who have medical and administrative waivers or pending requests, or have already signed up for shots.</p> <p>Army officials said that less than one percent of active-force members have refused the vaccination order without a pending or approved exemption. Thousands of troops requested religious exemptions, but none have been granted, officials said.</p> <p>On Wednesday, the Senate passed final legislation that would prohibit the service branches from dishonorably discharging any member who refused to get the coronavirus vaccine. The measure, which was supported by Republicans in the House and the Senate, allows those who declined the vaccine to receive certain benefits after leaving the military.</p> <p>Earlier this week, five governors wrote a joint letter to Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III asking that their National Guard troops be exempted from a federal coronavirus vaccine mandate, escalating what had been a single state conflict over inoculations. While National Guard troops helped oversee large vaccine sites for Americans across the country last year, they have lagged behind their active-duty counterparts in getting shots.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 France bans nonessential travel to Britain
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/16/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#france-uk-travel-restrictions-omicron
GIST	<p>The French government on Thursday banned nonessential travel to and from Britain and tightened testing requirements for travelers, as a record-breaking surge of Omicron cases across the English Channel raised worries that France would soon face a similar tsunami of new infections.</p>

Jean Castex, France's prime minister, said in a statement that, "faced with the extremely rapid spread of the Omicron variant in the United Kingdom," the government had decided to act. He urged people planning to travel to Britain to postpone their trips.

British authorities reported 88,376 new coronavirus cases on Thursday, the highest number of known infections in a single day since the start of the pandemic. England's chief medical officer warned that further records would likely be broken in the coming days, with [cases of the Omicron variant doubling less than every two days](#) in parts of the country.

Mr. Castex said that starting Saturday, travel to or from Britain would be allowed for only "urgent" reasons — like a family medical emergency or a legal summons — regardless of the traveler's vaccination status. The new restrictions effectively bar French and British tourists during the busy holiday season.

Nonessential business trips are also banned under the new restrictions, Mr. Castex said, but he added that the new rules would not apply to French citizens living in Britain who wish to return to France.

Those who do leave Britain for France will face stricter testing requirements, even if they are vaccinated. All travelers will have to present a negative virus test taken within 24 hours of departure, down from 48 hours. (The 24-hour rule already existed for unvaccinated travelers.)

All travelers arriving from Britain will also have to register online and isolate for up to 10 days. However, they can take a test 48 hours after arrival, and if that comes back negative, they can end their isolation period.

France is already facing a [surge in cases](#) attributed to the Delta variant, pressuring a hospital system that is short-staffed and under strain after nearly two years of battling the virus. Nearly 3,000 Covid-19 patients are in intensive care, the highest level since June, and the authorities expect that number to rise to 4,000 by the end of the year.

Gabriel Attal, a French government spokesman, [told the BFMTV news channel](#) on Thursday that the goal of the new travel restrictions was to "slow down and reduce as much as possible the arrival of cases of the Omicron variant on our soil."

Mr. Attal said that 240 cases of the variant had already been detected in France, but he added that "there are probably more." The government is convening a special cabinet meeting on Friday over the virus, and could announce more new measures in the coming days.

France recently [closed nightclubs for four weeks](#) and tightened some restrictions in schools. But President Emmanuel Macron, who is widely expected to run for re-election in April, has ruled out any additional lockdowns, curfews or closures, arguing that heightened vigilance around social distancing, coupled with a swift booster shot campaign, would be enough to keep the surges in check.

In a [televised interview](#) on Wednesday evening, Mr. Macron said it was likely that additional Covid-19 booster shots would be necessary in the future.

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HEADLINE	12/16 More companies alter plans, cancel events
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/16/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#return-to-office-omicron
GIST	<p>The rapid spread of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus continues to upend companies' plans and force changes to policies. Some of the latest developments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Citigroup sent a memo to its staff in New York and New Jersey giving them the option to work from home through the holidays given the surge in cases in the New York metropolitan area. <p>JPMorgan Chase and Morgan Stanley haven't changed their policies, staff are being given the</p>

	<p>flexibility to work from home, according to people familiar with the situation who declined to be identified discussing personnel matters.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • JPMorgan Chase’s huge health care conference is going virtual. The event, set to begin on Jan. 10, is moving online “out of an abundance of caution,” the bank told attendees on Wednesday. • Goldman Sachs reportedly told teams in New York to cancel holiday parties. The bank has already held several parties over the past few weeks. JPMorgan and Morgan Stanley are reportedly allowing individual teams and departments to go ahead with holiday parties (for now). • Apple delayed its return to office “to a date yet to be determined.” The company told employees on Wednesday of the change in plans after already pushing back its return date three times. It also temporarily shut stores in Annapolis, Md., Miami and Ottawa in response to a rise in coronavirus cases. • Several Broadway shows were canceled and the Metropolitan Opera will require booster shots. The cancellations came after cast or crew members for shows, including “Hamilton,” tested positive. The Met’s new rule mandating boosters for staff and audience members, which takes effect on Jan. 17, makes it the first major performing arts institution to introduce such a measure. “Everyone is going to be doing this,” said Peter Gelb, the Met’s general manager.
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HEADLINE	12/16 Nursing home residents: 55% booster shots
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/16/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#only-55-percent-of-nursing-home-residents-have-received-booster-shots
GIST	<p>Only a little more than half of nursing home residents in the United States have received a coronavirus booster shot, according to federal officials, even as infections continue to occur among residents and employees and the highly contagious Omicron variant spreads across the country.</p> <p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said about 55 percent of residents had received a vaccine booster as of the end of last week. In states like Arizona, Florida and Nevada, the figure is less than 40 percent.</p> <p>More than a dozen states, including Connecticut, Minnesota and New York, have boosted 60 to 75 percent of their nursing home residents, according to the federal data, which does not include reporting from every facility.</p> <p>As Covid cases climb among nursing home residents with waning immunity — a trend that may be further fueled by the coming holidays and the Omicron variant — federal officials are emphasizing the importance of providing booster shots as quickly as possible.</p> <p>The rollout in nursing homes has appeared to be lagging in recent weeks, with little public information being released about the efforts until recently.</p> <p>At a White House press briefing this week, Rochelle Walensky, the C.D.C. director, alluded to updated vaccination rates as showing significant progress.</p> <p>“We know we have more work to do,” she said. “C.D.C. is working in close partnership with states, localities and providers across the country to expand access to boosters and to ensure that every state has access to the resources and support they need to protect those at highest risk, including residents of long-term care facilities.”</p> <p>Boosters seem particularly important in protecting nursing home residents, many of whom are old and at high risk of severe illness, Dr. Walensky said. They were among the first to receive the initial vaccines, and it is likely their immunity to the virus has waned.</p> <p>Those who have received a booster “have a 10 times lower rate of getting SARS-CoV-2 in comparison to those residents who have only received a primary vaccination series or are unvaccinated,” she said.</p>

	<p>The nursing home industry has defended its efforts to get residents boosted but acknowledged the newfound urgency.</p> <p>“Given new data indicating that Omicron is highly contagious and that boosters are critical for nursing home residents, we need to increase the pace and are strongly encouraging long-term care providers to double down on their booster shot efforts,” Dr. David Gifford, the chief medical officer at the American Health Care Association, a trade group, said in a statement.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 EU agency: antiviral pill for high-risk adults
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/16/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#pfizers-antiviral-pills-can-be-used-in-high-risk-adults-the-eu-drug-regulator-says
GIST	<p>The European Medicines Agency said on Thursday that it was recommending the use of an antiviral treatment developed by Pfizer to treat some adults who contract the coronavirus and are at risk of severe disease.</p> <p>The agency, which regulates drugs in the European Union, said the Pfizer treatment, called Paxlovid and taken in pill form, was expected to reduce the need for hospitalization.</p> <p>The agency has yet to authorize Paxlovid, but said its recommendation paved the way for national governments to start using the treatment on an emergency basis “in the light of rising rates of infections and deaths” across the continent. One member nation, Italy, has already ordered a supply of Paxlovid.</p> <p>European Union officials warned on Wednesday that the highly contagious Omicron variant could be the dominant cause of coronavirus cases in the bloc as soon as mid-January, and may drive up numbers of hospitalizations and deaths. The bloc’s infectious disease agency has said Omicron poses a “very high” risk.</p> <p>In a clinical trial, Pfizer reported, Paxlovid reduced the risk of hospitalization or death in unvaccinated, medically vulnerable patients by 88 percent if given within five days of the onset of symptoms. Though the Delta variant was dominant during the clinical trial, the company said this month that Paxlovid also worked well in studies against the Omicron variant.</p> <p>In its recommendation on Thursday, the European Medicines Agency said that the treatment could be used in patients who did not require supplemental oxygen, and that it should be administered as soon as possible after a Covid-19 diagnosis and within five days of the start of symptoms.</p> <p>The agency gave similar advice last month for an anti-Covid pill developed by Merck, which seems to be substantially less effective than Pfizer’s. The agency is formally reviewing both treatments.</p> <p>About two-thirds of the E.U.’s residents have been fully vaccinated, and about 14 percent have received a booster shot. But it remains uncertain how well current vaccines protect against the Omicron variant. And some member nations, especially along the bloc’s eastern edge, lag far behind in vaccinations.</p> <p>The head of the bloc’s infectious disease agency warned on Wednesday that there was no time left to close the gaps in vaccination rates before the worst of Omicron hits, so the bloc should not expect vaccinations alone to blunt the surge in cases.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Experts in Ontario: need stricter measures
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/16/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#experts-in-ontario-call-for-circuit-breaker-measures-to-stunt-an-omicron-wave

GIST	<p>Though the Canadian province of Ontario is racing to offer booster doses and rapid antigen tests to curb coronavirus spread, that may not be enough to head off a huge surge in new cases caused by the highly contagious Omicron variant, a provincial scientific advisory panel warned on Thursday.</p> <p>Citing new projections from computer models, the panel urged officials to take more preventive steps immediately, or face the prospect of overwhelmed hospitals, “unsustainable levels” of intensive-care demand, and daily case records beyond any yet seen during the pandemic.</p> <p>The province is already taking some of the recommended steps. It announced on Wednesday that it was widening eligibility for booster shots and imposing capacity limits on large indoor venues, among other measures.</p> <p>Omicron is poised to overtake Delta as the dominant virus variant in the province, according to new projections released on Thursday by the panel, known as the Ontario Covid-19 Science Advisory Table.</p> <p>Increased vaccination alone would not be sufficient to stunt the Omicron-fueled wave, the panel warned. It called for adopting “circuit breakers” like limits on person-to-person contact and more rapid testing to “help buy time” for vaccine booster shots to be administered and take full effect.</p> <p>The measures are not “any sort of new things that we haven’t seen before,” Adalsteinn Brown, a co-chair of the advisory panel, said during a news conference on Thursday. “It’s those core public health measures.”</p> <p>Citing hard-hit businesses and schools, he added, “I recognize that these are very, very hard decisions, and I don’t think that we need to necessarily stop things full-out.”</p> <p>The Ontario government announced on Wednesday that it would expand eligibility for booster shots to anyone 18 or older, effective Dec. 20, and that it was preparing to administer 200,000 to 300,000 vaccine doses a day.</p> <p>It also said indoor venues like sports arenas, museums and casinos that can accommodate more than 1,000 people would be limited to 50 percent of capacity starting Saturday.</p> <p>“Today’s modeling would not have factored this action into their assumptions,” Alexandra Hilkenne, a spokesperson for Ontario’s health minister, wrote in an emailed statement.</p> <p>Ms. Hilkenne noted that the province was offering free rapid antigen tests through schools, government-run liquor stores and other outlets.</p> <p>Close to 88 percent of Ontarians 12 and older are fully vaccinated, according to the minister of health. But it remains unclear how well existing vaccines protect against the variant.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 UN chief fears vaccine strategy falls short
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/16/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#un-chief-says-vaccine-goals-for-this-year-wont-be-met
GIST	<p>The leader of the United Nations expressed worry on Thursday that its health agency’s Covid-19 strategy would fall well short of year-end and mid-2022 vaccination targets, a failure he blamed on the rich-poor divide in access to vaccines that had given coronavirus variants “a free pass to run wild.”</p> <p>Speaking at his customary end-of-year meeting with journalists, Secretary General António Guterres also acknowledged that the pandemic, about to enter its third year, was not going away.</p>

“If things do not improve — and improve fast — we face even harder times ahead,” Mr. Guterres said at the meeting, held virtually from his Manhattan home to minimize the risk of inadvertently spreading the virus.

While Mr. Guterres has not tested positive for the virus, he has been in contact with his spokesman, Stéphane Guterres, who said on Wednesday that he had tested positive. Both have been fully vaccinated and received boosters.

Mr. Guterres has been an outspoken critic of what he has described as a moral “obscurity” of affluent countries hoarding or wasting vaccines while lower-income countries are struggling to obtain enough — or any at all.

Mr. Guterres said the World Health Organization had aimed to vaccinate at least 40 percent of people in all countries by year’s end and 70 percent by mid-2022. But 98 countries won’t meet that end-of-year target, Mr. Guterres said, and 40 of them had not been able to vaccinate even 10 percent of their populations.

Moreover, he said, vaccination rates in high-income countries were eight times higher than in the countries of Africa, which may not be able to meet the 70 percent goal until August 2024.

“Vaccine inequity is giving variants a free pass to run wild — ravaging the health of people and economies in every corner of the globe,” he said. “We cannot defeat the pandemic in an uncoordinated way.”

Earlier Thursday, the director general of the W.H.O., Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, also expressed alarm about low vaccination rates in poorer parts of the world, particularly in Africa.

Speaking at a public health conference on Africa, Dr. Tedros commended what he described as the most ambitious vaccination effort ever undertaken over the past year, with more than 8.5 billion doses administered, which he said had achieved a vaccination percentage of 43 percent for the world population as a whole. But that figure obscured the vaccination rate in Africa, which is only 8 percent.

Dr. Tedros also acknowledged that [“we are still a long way”](#) from reaching the W.H.O.’s vaccination targets for 2021 and mid-2022.

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HEADLINE	12/16 ‘Abnormal’ storms tear through Midwest
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/16/great-plains-storms-tornadoes-tear-through-midwest
GIST	<p>One person has died after a spark of powerful storms across the Great Plains and midwest region, with tornadoes spotted in Nebraska and Iowa.</p> <p>A truck driver in eastern Iowa was killed on Wednesday evening after his truck was caught in high winds amid severe weather in the area, causing the semitrailer he was driving to roll over, according to Iowa state patrol.</p> <p>High winds, snow and other harsh weather conditions were reported north of the Great Lakes area, according to the National Weather Service. At least 13 tornadoes were reported on Wednesday, with high winds clocking in at over 70mph throughout parts of Kansas, Nebraska and Iowa.</p> <p>“To have this number of damaging wind storms at one time would be unusual any time of year,” said Brian Barjenbruch, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Valley, Nebraska. “But to have this happen in December is really abnormal.”</p> <p>The storm system came after a slew of tornadoes last weekend that cut through Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, Tennessee and Kentucky, killing more than 85 people.</p>

	<p>Dust created by severe winds in the area also reduced visibility to zero in parts of Kansas, causing at least four semitrailer trucks to blow over, said the Kansas Department of Transportation. Officials in Kansas also closed all state highways across nine counties in the state, including Interstate 70, which runs from the Colorado border to Salina, Kansas, an hour and a half outside the state's capital.</p> <p>High wind warnings were also issued for a large area extending from New Mexico to upper Michigan, including Wisconsin and Illinois. Strong wind gusts of 80mph were recorded in Texas panhandle and in western Kansas, with some areas clocking winds of over 100mph.</p> <p>In addition to strong winds, experts have warned about a fire risk in some areas already affected by high winds due to dry conditions.</p> <p>Scientists have said that extreme weather events are probably due to human-caused climate change, but trying to find a cause for a specific weather event, such as storms throughout many regions in the US, requires additional analysis that requires time and can be inconclusive.</p> <p>"I think we also need to stop asking the question of whether or not this event was caused by climate change. All events nowadays are augmented by climate change," said Northern Illinois University meteorology professor Victor Gensini.</p> <p>"We need to be asking, 'to what extent did climate change play a role and how likely was this event to occur in the absence of climate change?'"</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Covid surge slows US, Europe recovery
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19-surge-slows-european-recovery-but-supply-problems-ease-11639651970?mod=hp_lead_pos6
GIST	<p>Rising Covid-19 infection rates, inflationary pressures and labor shortages slowed the economic recovery in the U.S. and Europe this month despite signs the supply problems that have hobbled factories over recent months were easing.</p> <p>Surveys of purchasing managers released Thursday by data firm IHS Markit showed that in the early weeks of December, U.S. business activity continued to expand but at the slowest pace in three months despite strong demand from customers.</p> <p>"Strong recoveries are being dampened by the latest wave of the virus," said Bert Colijn, a senior economist at ING Bank.</p> <p>The composite Purchasing Managers Index for the U.S.—a measure of activity in both the services and manufacturing sectors—fell to 56.9 in December from 57.2 in November, IHS Markit said. A reading above 50.0 indicates an increase in activity, while a measure below that threshold points to a decline.</p> <p>"The survey data paint a picture of an economy showing encouraging resilience to rising virus infection rates and worries over the Omicron variant," said Chris Williamson, chief business economist at IHS Markit, referring to the U.S. data. "Manufacturing output growth even picked up slightly amid a marked easing in the number of supply chain delays, which also helped to take pressure off raw material prices."</p> <p>Separately, the Federal Reserve reported Thursday that November industrial production rose to its highest level since September 2019. Output in the U.S. manufacturing, mining and utility sectors rose a seasonally adjusted 0.5% in November from the previous month. That was slower than October's 1.7% increase, which followed disruptions in September caused by Hurricane Ida.</p>

In the eurozone, the composite PMI fell to 53.4 from 55.4, its lowest level since March, IHS Markit said. Activity in Germany's service sector declined for the first time in eight months, while activity in the economy as a whole stalled.

Even before the existence of [the Omicron variant](#) was confirmed in late November, Covid-19 infection rates in Germany and other parts of Europe were on the rise, prompting a fresh wave of government restrictions and consumer hesitancy. In the U.S., infections started ticking up late last month. Signs that Omicron can spread faster than the currently dominant Delta virus have only added to those headwinds.

There were signs of optimism in the manufacturing sector on both sides of the Atlantic, however, as supply problems showed early signs of improvement. Material shortages eased to their lowest level since May in the U.S. Price increases for inputs rose at the slowest pace in the last seven months. But companies still struggled to hire new workers even as order backlogs rose.

The IHS Markit surveys also found that eurozone factories reported slightly slower increases in the prices they paid for raw materials and other inputs, as well as the prices they charge their customers. The currency area's manufacturing sector saw output increase at a faster pace as a result.

While the Delta variant continued to dominate eurozone infections during the survey period, the U.K. has seen a surge in infections by the Omicron variant, which is expected to become the dominant form of the virus in the country within days.

How Britain fares against Omicron could offer clues to the U.S. and the rest of the industrialized world about how the variant behaves in a highly vaccinated population, how sick those who are infected get and if its dozens of mutations have given Omicron enough of an advantage on the evolutionary ladder to starve Delta of the hosts it needs to stay on top.

The government has responded by reimposing some public-health restrictions, while mobility data indicates that Britons have become more cautious about activities that involve physical proximity with other people.

According to the survey of purchasing managers, that led to a sharp slowdown in services activity during the first weeks of December, although unlike its German counterpart, it continued to grow.

"The positive gains over the last 10 months were wiped out by yet another round of restrictions and curbs on consumers and businesses," said Duncan Brock of the Chartered Institute of Procurement Supply, which helps conduct the survey.

There were also signs of slowing growth in Japan and Australia, although the new variant doesn't appear to have been a big factor, with businesses instead pointing to supply problems as a significant challenge.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Omicron surge changing rules of travel
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/travel-rules-pandemic-vaccine-tests-masks-11639604033?mod=hp_listc_pos1
GIST	<p>Anyone hoping to comply with the latest Covid-related travel restrictions should start by assuming they are nothing like the ones in the city, state or country next door to their destination.</p> <p>Countries have been swift to impose new travel restrictions due to concerns about the Omicron variant. Each destination sets its own requirements, and the rules are far from consistent, which can cause extra stress and confusion for travelers.</p> <p>The confusion over Omicron is just one of many for travelers.</p> <p>Certain destinations now require children to be vaccinated to access indoor venues, and others require time-sensitive Covid-19 tests. Some locations expect neither.</p>

For those traveling, this means the [requirements on each trip will change](#), not just based on where you go but who you go with. Travel advisers say the most important thing you can do is be proactive and check local guidelines frequently.

“You really have to pre-plan everything now,” says Susan Peavey, owner of Susan Peavey Travel in Marshfield, Mass.

In the short term, the biggest changes are the rules on predeparture Covid-19 testing, says Diane Sherer, owner and founder of Beyond Traveled, based in Los Angeles.

The U.S. now requires [international air travelers](#), including its citizens, to have a negative Covid-19 test within a day of departure to the U.S., regardless of vaccination status. The U.K.—where public-health [officials estimated](#) Omicron cases are doubling faster than every two days—is requiring tests both before departure and after arrival. France requires a negative Covid-19 test taken within 48 hours of departure for travelers arriving from outside the European Union, including those who are fully vaccinated. On Thursday, it said it will restrict tourist arrivals from the U.K. starting Saturday.

The changing requirements are creating headaches for travelers. For Dylan Kroll and his wife, Brittney, the 48-hour countdown clock for France began as they walked down the aisle at their wedding last Saturday.

The pair searched around the Tampa Bay metro area to find a suitable testing location in the days leading up to the wedding. They ended up finding one that was open on Sunday and could deliver rapid test results ahead of their Monday flight.

Mr. Kroll says he wondered if the restrictions were worth the added stress. The pair considered postponing the honeymoon, but ultimately decided to forge ahead.

“When else will it actually feel like the honeymoon than right after the wedding?” he says.

Other popular destinations, including Mexico, have asked much less of U.S. travelers. Mexico doesn’t require a pre-departure Covid-19 test or proof of vaccination for entry, though air travelers must provide a negative test to return to the U.S.

Another complication: Compared with earlier in the year, when many countries remained closed to tourists, borders have largely remained open to U.S. travelers in recent weeks. But the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continues to add to the list of foreign countries it advises Americans to avoid.

The rules range widely within the U.S., too. [California now requires](#) masking in public indoor settings regardless of vaccination status. [New York City requires](#) kids 5 to 11 to show proof of one vaccination dose for indoor dining, fitness, entertainment and performance venues.

The Delta variant [has fueled](#) case and hospitalization surges in parts of the country including the Northeast and Midwest, and the Omicron variant is gaining ground.

Cruise lines have taken a range of approaches to requiring vaccines for children. Beginning Jan. 13, [Disney Cruise Line](#) will [require passengers](#) 5 and older to show proof of vaccination against Covid-19. [Royal Caribbean](#) requires passengers 12 and older to show [proof of vaccination](#), and says vaccination is recommended, but not required, for children 11 and under. The cruise line [says on its website](#) unvaccinated kids under age 12 must complete additional testing requirements.

Jasmin Samlal, a travel adviser based in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., has been fielding questions from clients who are confused about Covid-19 tests and cruising. Those who are taking European river cruises need to plan to get a negative test before returning to the U.S. by plane. But those returning via a seaport don’t need a negative test to re-enter the country.

	<p>The CDC requires vaccinated cruise passengers to take a Covid-19 test no more than two days before boarding a ship in the U.S. Unlike with air travelers, vaccinated cruise passengers don't need to present a negative test taken within one day prior to returning to the U.S. The order doesn't apply to passengers arriving at seaports.</p> <p>Whether someone chooses to travel now depends on their comfort level, Ms. Sherer says.</p> <p>"Complication doesn't mean impossibility. It means dot your i's and cross your t's and let's go," she says.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Staff shortage, violence threat closes HS
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/education/lab/seattles-franklin-high-forced-to-cancel-class-following-threat-of-violence/
GIST	<p>About half of Seattle's Franklin High School educators and staff called in sick Thursday — forcing administrators to cancel classes — following an online social media threat that was later determined to be a hoax.</p> <p>School was first canceled Wednesday morning, before students arrived, after threats of violence were reported. But staff was required to go in "despite the valid safety concern," according to a statement from Franklin High union representatives, who are part of the Seattle Education Association.</p> <p>That prompted more than half the staff to take Thursday off.</p> <p>"The Franklin community needs time to process the events that happened on December 15," said a statement from Franklin High union reps for the Seattle Education Association. "We the Franklin staff are using today, December 16, to both process our own stress and plan how to support student re-entry with a focus on mental health and student voices."</p> <p>Seattle police later determined the threat was a hoax, Seattle Public Schools spokesperson Tim Robinson said in an email. While the investigation was ongoing during the day Wednesday, Franklin High educators were told to stay in the school building. If they felt unsafe, "we were informed that using personal time was required to leave the building," SEA's statement said.</p> <p>"The message was clear that it was more important to SPS that they can monitor the staff than it was to protect them, even when there are no students present in the building," the union's statement said. "Even if the threat was truly neutralized last night, more needed to be done for us to feel prepared to reenter the building."</p> <p>Of the 120 classified and certified staff, 61 called in sick Thursday, Robinson said.</p> <p>If staff absentee rates remain the same or increase Friday, the school will again cancel classes, the district said. But Robinson said students should be prepared to go to school. The missed school days will be made up at the end of the year.</p> <p>What happened Wednesday shows the "deficits" in Seattle Schools protocol, procedures and communication when threats of violence occur, union representatives said. They called the incident an opportunity for the district to provide more transparency on decision-making and to improve protocols when threats of violence are made.</p> <p>Franklin High students are standing in solidarity with educators "who have used their sick leave as an action to protect and prioritize the collective mental and physical health of our school community," a statement from the associated student body government said.</p>

On Wednesday, “Educators were not given the same care and consideration as students and were required to go into the school building while there was an active shooting threat,” the student statement said. “This decision by the SPS district was unnecessary and disregards the safety of educators.”

Delano Cordoza, a senior at Franklin High and the student body vice president, said he saw the threat and notified administrators Wednesday morning before school started.

He said the threat indicated the incident could happen Wednesday, Thursday or Friday.

Natalya McConnell, sophomore class president at Franklin High, said she was about to leave for school Wednesday morning when the district announced classes were canceled.

“There are so many guns in the U.S. and they [a student] could easily get their hands on a gun and that scares me so much,” she said. “We saw in Michigan how that child got a gun from their parents and ... that could become Franklin and I don’t want to see that happen.”

If teachers don’t feel safe at school then nobody is safe, McConnell said, and if the school district had prioritized the safety of staff, school cancellations could have been avoided.

Robinson, the SPS spokesperson, said Franklin “has experienced higher than normal absenteeism for much of the school year, and the district continues to face a shortage of substitute teachers. We are working to find solutions to both issues.”

Staff shortages [closed schools in Seattle, Bellevue and Kent last month](#).

But McConnell sees it differently. “The reasons school was canceled isn’t because of staff shortages — it’s because the district disregarded the safety of educators,” McConnell said.

At least [five other](#) threats of violence in Seattle schools have been investigated this month. A [national threat of school shootings](#) is currently circulating on social media.

In a statement released Thursday, the King County Sheriff’s Office said it will remain “vigilant” in assessing social media comments about threats of violence to schools. The Sheriff’s Department is unaware of any credible threats to schools in the county.

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HEADLINE	12/16 CDC forecast: 15,600 weekly Covid deaths
SOURCE	https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-10314687/CDC-issues-grim-forecast-warning-weekly-COVID-cases-jump-55-1-3-MILLION-Christmas-Day.html
GIST	<p>Grim new figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have predicted that US COVID-19 deaths will soar by 73 per cent to 15,600 a week by January 8, and that cases will rocket to 1.3 million a week by Christmas Day</p> <p>The agency revealed projections on Wednesday afternoon that show America will suffer up to 15,600 new Covid deaths a week as of January 8 - or 2,228 deaths per day - a 58 per cent increase from 8,900 deaths currently being recorded each week, equivalent to 1,285 deaths a day.</p> <p>Another CDC prediction estimates that between 620,000 and 1.3 million Americans will have been diagnosed with Covid by the week that ends on December 25 - Christmas Day.</p> <p>That represents a 55 per cent leap on the 840,000 cases that have been recorded over the last week.</p> <p>And hospitalizations are also on course to rocket to 18,400 hospitalizations.</p>

Omicron will likely become the dominant Covid strain in the coming weeks, and cause a massive surge of cases shortly after Christmas, one expert has warned, likely fueling the surge the CDC predicts.

Dr Gregory Poland, a top epidemiologist at the Mayo Clinic told DailyMail.com that an Omicron-fueled surge in cases could be right around the corner.

'As best any of us can model, we will have an explosion of cases after the holidays in the in the early-to-mid-January timeframe,' he said.

'This variant is hyper transmissible, it spreads exponentially in an environment of cold weather, massive holiday get togethers, no masking and insufficient immunization.'

He believes it will become the dominant strain in the UK - which recorded a record 78,610 cases on Wednesday - in the coming days, and that the U.S. will follow around two weeks later.

Cornell University in upstate New York is suspected to be home to the first US Omicron cluster, after 930 students were diagnosed with the virus in recent days. The college says every one of the positive tests it has sequenced so far has been the Omicron variant.

A Cornell spokesman hasn't said exactly how many Omicron cases have been identified, but added that they expect most, if not all, the 930 cases to be caused by the new variant.

Poland points to Cornell as an example of how quickly the variant can spread and how even the fully vaccinated are at risk from the newly discovered strain, as the campus with a vaccination rate of over 97 percent quickly racked up over 900 cases in a matter of days.

'This is hyper transmissible.,' Dr Poland said.

'People have been satisfying themselves, [saying] "that I was previously infected, or I had two doses of the vaccine [so I should be safe]", they're in for a big surprise.

'If you're not boosted, you're susceptible, whether you previously were infected or had two doses. And more importantly, you're susceptible to severe to moderate disease.'

He says that while early reports from South Africa and Europe suggest that the variant may be more mild, it will still kill some people, and everyone should do what they can to prevent themselves from being the ones who die.

Poland also told DailyMail.com that the variant is likely spreading so fast across the U.S., that the country's genetic sequencing infrastructure can not keep up with it.'

'We do so little sequencing that we really don't have a good idea of Omicron epidemiology at the local level,' he said.

Because of the country's relatively low ability to sequence cases, he says that there are likely 100 actual cases of Omicron for every one that is confirmed in America.

There are also fears that other Covid treatments, like some of the monoclonal antibody cocktails used on people already infected with the virus, may be less effective against the new strain. Early data also shows the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine may not be effective against the mutant strain.

Meanwhile in the UK, confirmed Omicron cases surpassed 10,000 on Wednesday, nearly doubling from the day before, as the Covid plagued islands prepares for the outbreak to worsen over time. An all-time high number of Covid cases- 78,610 - were recorded in the UK on Wednesday, with warnings the Omicron surge could repeatedly break that record in the coming weeks.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson supercharged the countries booster shot rollout in an effort to protect his citizens. And his top expert, Professor Chris Whitty, has warned people not to assume that Omicron is less dangerous because of preliminary data showing it appears to cause milder symptoms.

In other parts of Europe, both Denmark and Norway continue to struggle with Covid outbreaks of their own. Both countries set new Covid records this week and have sequenced over 1,000 cases of the new variant.

European Union officials are sounding alarms as well, saying that the variant could be the continent's dominant strain by mid-January.

There are also fears that other Covid treatments, like some of the monoclonal antibody cocktails used on people already infected with the virus, may be less effective against the new strain. Early data also shows the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine may not be effective against the mutant strain.

Omicron cases in the United States have jumped seven-fold in a week, the CDC revealed, with data from states showing confirmed infections with the new COVID variant jumped 27 per cent in the last 24 hours, from 189 to 241.

On Tuesday, the CDC said Omicron is now estimated to account for 2.9 per cent of all Covid cases, up from 0.4 per cent a week ago, meaning the true number of infections from the new strain likely numbers in the thousands.

Meanwhile, CDC Director Dr Rochelle Walensky said Omicron comprises up to 13 per cent of new infections in New York and New Jersey, with the variant now confirmed to have been found in 36 states, as well as Washington DC.

Experts recently warned a 'tidal wave' of Omicron is headed to the US, with the UK recording its biggest one day diagnosis total - 78,610 cases on Wednesday, 10,000 of which were the new variant, giving Americans a likely preview of what's to come.

According to most recent data gathered by [BNO](#) - which scrapes data from local health departments nationwide - cases of the variant have jumped to 241, up by 52 cases from Wednesday.

Overall, cases in the U.S. are continuing to grow, up 46 per cent over the past two weeks to 121,687 per day. More than 67,000 people are in the hospital with the virus every day as well, up 22 per cent over the past two weeks. Deaths are nearing the 1,300 per day mark as well, up 40 per cent.

As of 11 am on Wednesday, Johns Hopkins reports that 50,251,149 Covid cases and 800,867 deaths have been recorded in the United States since the pandemic first began in March 2020.

One of the largest known outbreaks of Omicron in the world so far has occurred at Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York. The school has reported 930 Covid cases in recent days, with almost all of the cases sequenced found to be of the new variant. Cornell has refused to say exactly how many of its diagnoses are Omicron, with US officials generally sequencing one in five PCR tests to determine which Covid variant a person has been infected by.

School officials also report that all of the confirmed Omicron cases so far - for which they have not yet given a confirmed number - are in students who are fully vaccinated, and some have been boosted too. The school has closed campus as a result, and finals for the fall semester will now be held virtually.

Experts believe that people who are fully vaccinated have little protection against infection from the new variant, although preliminary data suggests vaccines do still prevent serious illness. Early data shows that the booster shot is required to lower the chances of infection from Omicron, with a Pfizer booster found to cut the risk of infection by about 70 per cent.

According to CDC data, though, only 16.5 per cent of Americans - and less than a fourth of fully vaccinated people - have received the additional jab, meaning hundreds of millions of people have effectively no protection against the variant.

Cornell University looks to be the site of America's first major Omicron outbreak.

The Ivy League school has recorded 930 positive Covid tests since December 7, per the school's Covid dashboard, including 883 cases among students.

This outbreak is despite 97 per cent of on-campus students, faculty and staff being fully-vaccinated.

Cornell collected many of these positive test samples, and its surveillance program detected that almost all of the samples have indicators of the Omicron variant.

The new virus strain was first detected by South African officials last month, and preliminary data shows it is highly infectious and has the ability to evade protection provided by the vaccines.

It is the most mutated Covid strain yet, with 50 total mutations, including 30 on the spike protein

An Israeli study from earlier this week found that people who have only received the basic vaccine series - or who would typically be considered fully vaccinated - are still vulnerable to infection from the new variant.

The same study found that receiving a booster shot would re-establish protection, though.

A promising study came out of South Africa this week, though.

The study, performed by Discovery Health - the nation's largest health insurer, finds that the variant spreads much faster than previous virus strains, and can circumvent protection provided by the Pfizer Covid vaccine - the most popular jab in the U.S.

Researchers did find that effects of the strain are relatively minor, though, and are unlikely to cause hospitalization or death, though. People infected with Omicron are 20 per cent less likely to be hospitalized than they would be if they caught the Delta variant, the study found.

Professor Chris Whitty, England's chief medical officer, warns that South African data may not be translatable to the UK, though, since his country was not hit as hard by Delta as some others were.

He said: 'I think there has been a certain amount of commentary about the fact that doctors and scientists from South Africa... have indicated that there may be some reduction in the hospitalization rates they are seeing with Omicron. I want to put a really serious caution on this because I think it has been overinterpreted.

'The amount of immunity for this wave because of prior Delta wave and vaccination is far higher than it was for their last wave and, therefore, the fact they have a lower hospitalization rate this time is unsurprising.

'That doesn't mean there is some degree of milder disease — that is possible — but I think there is a danger that people have overinterpreted this to say this is not a problem and there's nothing to worry about. I want to be clear, I am afraid this is going to be a problem.'

This also comes as cases and deaths begin to spike in the U.S., with some states particularly in the Northeast getting hammered by a post-Thanksgiving Covid wave.

Connecticut is experiencing the worst surge, with cases nearly tripling over the past two weeks. Around 71 of every 100,000 residents of the state are testing positive for the virus every day.

Nearby Maine (168 per cent increase in cases over the past two weeks), Delaware (93 per cent), Rhode Island (91 per cent), New Jersey (90 per cent) and Massachusetts (88 per cent) are also among the leaders.

Alabama has also experienced a doubling in new cases over the past two weeks, signaling that this recent winter surge is starting to take hold in the south as well.

A vast majority of these new cases are still of the Delta variant, though, as the strain that has dominated much of the second half of 2021 still makes up 97 per cent of sequenced cases in the U.S.

Despite the recent surge, Dr Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, said Wednesday during a news briefing that a Omicron specific booster was not yet necessary.

'Our booster vaccine regimens work against Omicron. At this point, there is no need for a variant-specific booster,' Fauci said.

'However, if you look at two weeks post the third dose, note the substantial degree of elevation of the neutralizing titer; well within the range of neutralizing Omicron.'

Despite these surges occurring nationwide, White House Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said that schools will remain open for in-person learning and should have the necessary resources to keep children and staff safe.

Across the pond, the UK has recorded 10,017 confirmed cases of the variant as of Wednesday morning, and the recent case surge has many fearing the worst.

Cases in the nation are starting to spike as well, the country recording 59,610 cases per day - a 30 per cent increase over the past two weeks.

On Wednesday, a new record was set with 78,160 positive Covid tests logged by the nation.

Deaths have actually decreased, though, with the nation averaging 150 per day - down 6.5 per cent from 180 per day being recorded two weeks ago - potentially a sign of how mild the variant can be.

Death figures do often lag behind case figures, though, meaning a mortality spike could be on the way as well.

In an effort to curb the recent surge in cases Prime Minister Johnson enacted strict masking and work from home measure last week. Some events and venues will also now require either proof of vaccine or a recent negative test to enter.

He has also enlisted the military and a thousands-strong volunteer force to speed up the rollout of Covid boosters, and also has extended the hours of clinics nationwide to keep up with booster demand.

Some fear it will not be enough, though, and that lockdowns could be around the corner in 2022 if the surge continues to worsen.

Denmark has recorded the second highest total of Omicron COVID-19 cases of any nation, with 6,047 sequenced as of Wednesday morning - a 2,000 case jump from yesterday.

One of the largest Omicron outbreaks in the world has been tied to a Christmas lunch event in the Viborg region, attended by 150 students on November 27 from two local high schools.

Around 70 cases of the variant have been tied to the event so far.

The country is following the UK in prioritizing the booster shots in an effort to limit the spread of the new variant.

Starting Monday, booster shots will be available to all Danes 40 years or older, hoping to first protect the most vulnerable citizens in the rollout of the shots.

Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced new measures to prevent spread of the virus last week, joining the UK.

People who can will now be ordered to work from home, and virtual schooling has been extended as well.

Bars and nightclubs will also have reduced operating hours, being forced to close at midnight now, in an effort to prevent transmission.

Still health officials still fear the variant will continue to spread in the European nation, and the country's health authorities said Monday they expect Omicron to be the dominant strain in Copenhagen, the nation's capital and largest city, by the end of the week.

The Nordic nation has now is now recording 6,846 new cases every day, almost double the previous record set by the country last winter.

Fearing a similar outbreak happening within its own borders, Israel restricted travel from both the UK and Denmark on Monday, adding the two European nations to a list of about 50 others.

It is the first country to ban travel from the UK and Denmark due to the Omicron variant.

Meanwhile in the U.S., President Biden banned travel from eight African countries, some of which are not suffering major Covid outbreaks at the moment, but still allows incoming travel from the UK and Denmark.

Norway suffered the first known outbreak of the Omicron variant, when a holiday party held by locally based energy company Scatec was tied to over 100 cases of Covid - with more than a dozen confirmed to be the new strain.

The company traveled to Cape Town, South Africa, in mid-November, before the discovery of the new strain.

At the party it is believed one person, dubbed 'patient zero', is at the center of the outbreak, with all cases being tied back to him.

After the party, company employees mingled with others at the restaurant it was being held at, and it is believed that over 50 more people who were not a part of the event contracted the virus then.

In the time since, cases in the nation have surged, reaching an all-time record of 4,856 per day on Wednesday.

To control the virus, Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Stoere announced the country would enter a partial lockdown, banning the serving of alcohol in bars, closing gyms and swimming pools, and other mandates.

A promising sign, though, is that none of the people tied to the Cape Town even suffered severe complications caused by the virus, and no deaths or hospitalizations have been tied to the event.

In South Africa, the nation where the variant was first detected, has reached a new record of over 21,000 Covid cases per day this week.

	<p>Nationwide, the amount of people admitted to the hospital for Covid has increased ten-fold over the last four weeks, from 562 to more than 5,900 last week.</p> <p>While officials in the country report that Omicron cases are relatively mild, many people in the Covid plagued nation are still suffering serious enough cases to require the additional care.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Tacoma public schools lockdown Friday
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/education/article256666272.html?ac_cid=DM580347&ac_bid=-1631261100
GIST	<p>All Tacoma Public Schools will be operating in a state of lockdown Friday following a post threatening violence on the social media platform TikTok that alarmed school districts, students and parents across the nation Thursday.</p> <p>Parents and guardians were notified of the Tacoma lockdown in an email from superintendent Carla Santorno late Thursday afternoon. Santorno called the TikTok post “troubling”.</p> <p>“The post refers to a threat to school safety ‘for every school in the USA, even elementary,’ on Friday, December 17,” Santorno wrote. “We have heard reports from other districts that the same post is circulating in their schools.” The threat, which is also being called a “challenge” by others, claims that shootings would occur Friday at schools across the nation.</p> <p>“While we do not believe the threat to be credible, we are closely monitoring the situation and taking it seriously,” Santorno said. She added an “increased police awareness” would be seen in the community but did not elaborate on what that meant.</p> <p>Tacoma schools will be operating in a modified lockdown on Friday.</p> <p>“That simply means all exterior doors will be locked while classes operate as normal inside each school,” she said. Santorno urged anyone with knowledge of threat to call 911.</p> <p>“Any threat against our schools is a crime,” she wrote. “Even if they are not credible threats, they can cause a great deal of stress and anxiety for our students, families, and staff. We ask our families to monitor their children’s social media activity and speak with them about proper behavior online.”</p> <p>Threats or so-called challenges on social media have become a problem for schools. A recent challenge urged impressionable youth to destroy public bathrooms. Other challenges urge people to kick doors and set fires.</p> <p>Joint Base Lewis-McChord also notified personnel of the threat on Thursday.</p> <p>“Schools will operate as normal; however, JBLM Provost Marshal will have an increased military police presence around the on-base schools as added precaution,” the military post said on Facebook. The Peninsula School District said it does not believe the threat to be credible but are “closely monitoring the situation and taking it seriously.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Race to gauge threat of omicron variant
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/16/health/coronavirus-omicron-variant.html
GIST	<p>Even as scientists race to understand more about the Omicron variant and the threat it poses, one fact is abundantly clear: It spreads quickly everywhere it lands.</p>

In South Africa, Omicron [spread twice as fast](#) as the highly infectious Delta variant. In Britain, [officials have estimated](#) that 200,000 people are becoming infected with Omicron every day. In Denmark, [Omicron cases are doubling](#) roughly every two days.

And early data from the United States suggest that Americans will not be spared. “No part of the country will be safe from Omicron,” said Shweta Bansal, a disease ecologist at Georgetown University.

Delta remains the dominant variant nationally and was driving a surge in cases and hospitalizations even before Omicron emerged. Roughly 120,000 new Covid cases are being reported every day, [a 40 percent increase](#) from two weeks ago, although the figures remain below last winter’s peak.

But Omicron could soon overtake Delta, scientists said. Nationally, the [share of cases caused](#) by Omicron has increased to 2.9 percent from 0.4 percent in just a week, according to projections by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and is far higher in some regions of the country.

Researchers at one University of Washington lab have reported that the share of viral samples seeming to contain Omicron’s telltale pattern of mutations [has jumped to 20 percent from 3 percent](#) in a matter of days.

In New York City, the test positivity rate has doubled in three days, [an adviser to the Mayor said](#) on Thursday, but officials don’t yet know how many of those infections were caused by Omicron.

Still uncertain is how serious the consequences will be, as much remains unknown about the variant, including how likely it is to cause severe disease.

Scientists believe that the vaccines will still provide protection against the worst outcomes; there is early evidence, for instance, that T cells, which can help prevent infections from progressing to severe disease, [should still recognize the variant](#). And boosters are likely to provide additional protection against infection, preliminary data suggests.

But the United States must redouble its fight against the virus, experts said. “I think we need to be prepared for the possibility that this could be at least as bad as any previous wave that we’ve seen,” said Justin Lessler, an epidemiologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. “We need to be thinking about what the plan is if things get bad.”

Omicron is not only highly transmissible but also skilled at evading the immune system’s defenses.

Breakthrough infections are common. This week, Denmark reported that three-quarters of its Omicron cases occurred in people who had received two vaccine doses. And [a recent outbreak](#) at Cornell University, where 97 percent of the population has reportedly been vaccinated, [may have been driven](#) by Omicron.

“There is no question that we’re seeing some level of immune escape and re-infection,” Dr. Lessler said. “Which means that the pool of people available to be infected with this virus is larger than it was before.”

Current levels of vaccination are unlikely to stop the variant, experts said. In Denmark, where Omicron is spreading rapidly, [77 percent of the population](#) is fully vaccinated, having received a two-dose vaccine or one-dose regimen, depending on the vaccine. That suggests that the United States, where 61 percent of people have completed their primary vaccine series, should brace itself for a similar wave of cases.

“Nothing we’ve seen so far gives any reassurance that the growth won’t be similarly explosive in the U.S.,” said Joshua Salomon, an infectious disease expert at Stanford University.

The question is how much the rapid spread of Omicron will contribute to hospitalizations and deaths.

“The most challenging question is severity,” said Dr. Christopher Murray, director of the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington.

Early evidence from South Africa has raised hopes that Omicron may be milder than Delta; [in one small report](#), researchers there noted that patients in a hospital Covid ward were less likely to require supplemental oxygen than during previous surges, for instance.

But it is still far too early, and the data sets are too small, to make broad conclusions about Omicron’s severity, especially because hospitalizations and deaths typically lag several weeks behind infections. “I’m not counting that as good news just yet,” Dr. Bansal said.

The population of the United States is older, and has a different pattern of vaccination and prior infection, than South Africa’s population, she noted.

And, she said, “even if infection is mild in many individuals, it’s not going to be mild in everyone.” If Omicron spreads rapidly and infects huge swaths of the population at once, it could still sicken enough people to overwhelm health care systems, some of which are already struggling to manage a surge of Delta cases.

“Here in the U.S., especially in some parts of the U.S., we are at capacity right now in our emergency rooms,” said Maimuna Majumder, a computational epidemiologist at Boston Children’s Hospital.

Hospitals have already lost staff over the course of the pandemic, she noted; if Omicron spreads rapidly through health care workers, forcing them to isolate at home, it could further strain capacity.

“Not only are there concerns about this ripping through people who are working the floor,” Dr. Majumder said, “but also there are far fewer people who are on the floor than there were two years ago at many hospitals throughout the country.”

There are still a lot of unanswered questions about Omicron and many possible trajectories for the coming weeks and months.

There has been some speculation that after a steep initial rise, new Omicron cases may be plateauing in the Gauteng province, the epicenter of South Africa’s latest outbreak.

“The rate of increase has certainly slowed,” said Ridhwaan Suliman, a mathematician and senior researcher at South Africa’s Council for Scientific and Industrial Research.

Still, Mr. Suliman was cautious about drawing definitive conclusions, particularly after a computer glitch and a reporting backlog last week gave the impression that cases were decreasing. A few days’ data are needed to determine whether the curve has turned, he said, and he warned that the trajectory may be different in other provinces, where vaccination rates are lower.

The good news, experts said, is that America has resources at its disposal, if it chooses to use them. Tests still work for Omicron. Vaccines are now widely available and could blunt the burden of severe disease.

Antiviral pills, which are expected to be effective against Omicron, could soon be available, although supplies will be very limited at first.

“There are more tools in our toolbox now than there were during the holiday season last year,” Dr. Majumder said.

People who are not yet vaccinated should get vaccinated, experts said, and those who are eligible for boosters should get them. And masking, testing and taking precautions when gathering with others indoors — the same behaviors that experts have long been recommending — can also help slow the spread.

	<p>But beyond these individual behaviors, officials still need to do more, experts said.</p> <p>The Biden administration, for instance, has focused heavily on promoting vaccination and boosters, which remain critical public health tools. But in the face of a foe like Omicron, they are not enough, experts warned.</p> <p>“The way we’re seeing it unfold in other places, the way we’re starting to see it take hold here, implies that a vaccination-only strategy is going to be very fragile,” Dr. Salomon said.</p> <p>Experts called on officials to improve access to testing, distribute high-quality masks, promote improved ventilation and issue clearer guidelines about what activities it is safe to engage in and in what circumstances.</p> <p>Local governments, schools and employers also need to begin making plans — and making those plans public — about what they will do in the event of large outbreaks or if cases or hospitalizations rise to a certain level, they noted.</p> <p>Many of these steps are long overdue, experts said, and were sorely needed even before Omicron was discovered.</p> <p>“We weren’t actually prepared for even the situation that we were in before the Omicron variant emerged,” Dr. Bansal said.</p> <p>And now that Omicron is here? “We’re not ready,” she said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 NATO signals support for Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/16/world/europe/ukraine-nato-russia.html
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine — Facing a building threat from Russia, Ukraine’s president sought security guarantees from NATO’s chief in a meeting on Thursday and came away with a renewed commitment that his country could eventually join the military alliance despite stiff objections from its Russian neighbors.</p> <p>While the timing of the statement by the chief, Jens Stoltenberg, sent an unmistakable message of support, it did not come with the commitments of military assistance that Ukrainian officials have been pleading for to deter, or possibly defend themselves against, a Russian military incursion.</p> <p>Standing next to the Ukrainian leader, Volodymyr Zelensky, at NATO headquarters in Brussels, Mr. Stoltenberg denounced the Russian military buildup but said nothing about providing Ukraine with the additional weaponry or troops it was seeking. He referred to a 2008 summit during which NATO members promised membership to Ukraine and Georgia.</p> <p>“We stand by that decision,” he said, without specifying a time frame.</p> <p>Ukraine has been locked in a grinding war with Russian-backed separatists since 2014 that has cost more than 13,000 lives. Though there is no indication it would be ready to join NATO anytime soon, Russian leaders argue that the prospect alone is a threat to Moscow’s national security, and have indicated they would be prepared to use force to stop it.</p> <p>More than 100,000 Russian troops have been deployed to regions in the north, east and south of Ukraine, along with heavy artillery and tank units, as well as rocket forces armed with missiles capable of striking deep within Ukraine, according to Western and Ukrainian officials. Western and Ukrainian intelligence agencies predict an incursion could begin within weeks or months.</p> <p>It is Russia, Mr. Zelensky said on Thursday — through its 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and continued military support for separatists in Ukraine’s east — that has pushed the country toward NATO.</p>

The alliance has an interest in supporting Ukraine at this moment, he suggested, because should Russia attack, NATO could be drawn in whether it wants to be or not.

“NATO doesn’t owe Ukraine anything,” Mr. Zelensky said.

“If our army is not able to hold up,” he said, it is NATO that will have to step in to contain any fallout from a Russian attack that might affect its member states.

The United States, the European Union and NATO have all said that any new Russian incursion into Ukraine would be met with harsh, intensified and extraordinary economic sanctions, including the likelihood of killing a favorite Kremlin project, the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to Germany, which bypasses Ukraine. The United States has also suggested that NATO would beef up its troop presence near Russia’s borders.

E.U. leaders, who will also hold a summit meeting on Thursday, met on Wednesday with Mr. Zelensky. At their Thursday meeting, they are expected to issue a stern warning to Russia about “massive consequences and severe costs,” should President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia start a new military operation against Ukraine, according to a draft communiqué.

There is no indication that Mr. Putin has decided whether to begin such an attack, and there is no consensus among Western officials and analysts about why he might want to do so now. But for much of this year, Mr. Putin has been fixated on Ukraine, seemingly angered that a country so close to Russia in culture, language and geography has drifted so far from its orbit.

At the very least, according to observers, the military buildup appears to be part of an attempt to pressure NATO countries to reverse what the Kremlin sees as a plot to wrest Ukraine away.

NATO regards the notion of such a plot as absurd.

More than a dozen NATO countries have military advisers in Ukraine, including 150 from the U.S. Special Forces and National Guard. The United States alone has spent \$2.5 billion in security assistance, which has included high-tech surveillance equipment, armed patrol boats and Javelin anti-tank systems.

But because Ukraine is not a NATO member, the alliance is under no obligation to defend it in case of attack.

That has given no visible comfort to the Kremlin, however, which has described NATO activities in Ukraine as an existential threat, even as Russian leaders have dismissed the threat posed by their own military buildup on the Ukrainian border.

In phone conversations this week with the leaders of Britain and France, two of NATO’s largest members, as well as the president of Finland, a close NATO partner, Mr. Putin delivered an identical demand: the immediate start of negotiations to codify strict limits to NATO’s expansion, particularly with regards to extending membership to Ukraine.

Mr. Putin delivered a similar message to President Biden in a video call last week that was aimed at ratcheting down tensions over Ukraine.

But Western officials have said that Mr. Putin’s demand to impose strict limits on NATO expansion is a nonstarter.

“NATO’s support for Ukraine is not a threat to Russia,” Mr. Stoltenberg said on Thursday. “Ukraine has the right to choose its own security arrangements. This is a fundamental principle of European security. And a decision on whether Ukraine can join NATO will be taken by Ukraine and 30 NATO allies alone.”

In the face of such refusals, the statements of Russia's leadership have become increasingly bellicose. Last week, Sergei Ryabkov, a deputy foreign minister and point person for negotiations with the United States, said that while Russia hoped for a diplomatic solution to the current crisis, "our arsenal for normalizing the situation" is significant.

"We are sure of the dependability of our defenses and in the ability of our armed forces to handle any task, so here there are no questions," he said at a news conference.

Repeatedly, Russian officials have warned that any attempt by Ukraine to start military action against Russian-backed separatist forces in the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine would be met with force, with Mr. Putin recently accusing the Ukrainians of genocide.

There is no evidence Ukraine is planning such action, nor has there been any sign that the Ukrainian military was mobilizing troops in the face of the Russian buildup. Such accusations, though, have unnerved Ukrainian and Western officials, who say they fear that the Kremlin could be trying on different pretexts for an eventual intervention.

While Mr. Putin has given no indication of whether he will order new military action in Ukraine, the Russian military buildup is continuing. As of this week, according to the Ukrainian military, there were just over 100,000 troops parked within striking range of the Ukrainian border, along with more than 1,300 tanks, 1,800 pieces of artillery and Iskander-M missile batteries capable of launching rocket attacks deep within Ukrainian territory.

Much of the focus has been Russian troop movement in Ukraine's east, along the border with two breakaway Ukrainian provinces, Donetsk and Luhansk, where Russian forces continue to support a bloody insurgency.

But perhaps more concerning, military analysts say, is a concentration of troops and equipment in the north and the northeast. In both places, the Russians have deployed a serious fighting force that experts say could be used to begin military action directed at Ukraine's capital, Kyiv.

"If you push toward Kyiv and you're outside the capital, this is not sustainable for the Ukrainian state," said Robert Lee, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran and Ph.D. candidate at King's College in London, who is a Russian military expert. "That's why the forces in the northern part are the real concern."

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HEADLINE	12/16 Test positive while traveling?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/16/travel/testing-positive-for-covid-overseas.html
GIST	<p>Millions of Americans are expected to travel over Christmas and New Year's, with some booking sites, such as Hopper, predicting that even international travel will approach prepandemic levels. As travelers try to decide whether to commit to their plans, many are grappling with the question: What if I test positive even though I'm vaccinated, and get stuck somewhere far from home?</p> <p>It's not an outrageous question. In 2019, more than 5 million people flew into the United States over the holiday period, according to Customs and Border Protection data. Every person age 2 and up who is returning to the United States from abroad by air — including vaccinated American citizens — has to take a coronavirus test within a day of their flight home. Even if the numbers of those traveling hover far below 2019 levels, some people will have to cancel their flights to the United States because they tested positive.</p> <p>Of course, for people who become severely sick with Covid, the immediate concerns go far beyond getting stuck. Over the past week, an average of 7,052 people around the world — including nearly 1,300 people in the United States — died each day from the coronavirus. For vaccinated people, the implications are generally less dire. Worrying about your inability to board a flight can feel self-indulgent when I.C.U.s in many places are overwhelmed. But from a planning perspective, the consequences are not insignificant.</p> <p>What are the odds of testing positive if you're vaccinated?</p>

Alas, [this was difficult to answer](#) even before the Omicron variant popped up in November. While research once [put the odds](#) of the average vaccinated American contracting Covid [at](#) around one in 5,000 per day, that figure is likely to increase as Omicron [spreads](#).

Though much is [still unknown](#) about the variant, early indications suggest that it infects vaccinated people at higher rates than previous variants. [One small study](#) found that the majority of the 43 people first identified with Omicron in the United States were fully vaccinated when they tested positive. There have been some early indications that the variant might cause milder disease than other variants and [scientists expect](#) that it's less likely to become severe in vaccinated people.

Boosters should decrease a vaccinated person's odds of becoming infected with multiple variants. Early data suggests that booster shots for the Moderna and the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines offer substantial protection against Omicron, Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, President Biden's top medical adviser, said Wednesday. Booster shots [start](#) having an effect in many people in just a few days, meaning that it's not too late to reap the benefits even if you're traveling soon, said Dr. Aaron Milstone, a professor of pediatric infectious disease at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, who is studying the immune response to booster doses. Even stronger protection is likely to kick in 10 to 14 days after the shot, he and other experts noted, so the sooner you get one, the better.

If I test positive while traveling within the United States, will I have to stay put?

When driving across a state border, no one is going to ask you to flash negative test results. Neither states, airlines, airports or most other forms of transportation require negative coronavirus tests from domestic travelers with a few exceptions: [Hawaii](#) and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

If you do end up testing positive — perhaps because a private gathering requires a test — the responsible course of action would be to isolate yourself from others because you are contagious, said Dr. Emily E. Volk, the president of the College of American Pathologists, an organization of physicians who perform biopsies and diagnose disease.

"It's the morally and ethically correct thing to do," she said.

But in most of America it's up to the individual to decide how to proceed. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advises isolating for [at least 10 days](#) after testing positive, even if a person never develops symptoms. In a [recent article](#) for The Atlantic magazine, the writer Katharine J. Wu argues that this recommendation is outdated and that vaccinated people should be able to test out of isolation sooner. Dr. David Freedman, the president-elect of the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, made a similar point in a recent interview: Once you've tested negative, you should feel OK about traveling again, he said.

Either way, for better or worse, these are just recommendations. Some employers, educational institutions, states and counties have additional isolation policies, but few locations actively enforce quarantine. Depending on where you tested positive, you might get a call from a contact tracer. Or you might not.

So what happens if you test positive while traveling internationally?

A crucial step while planning any trip is to familiarize yourself with the points at which you will have to take a test and what would happen if you or someone you were traveling with tested positive, including the length and type of quarantine. In some destinations, the only concrete consequence of a positive test is that you can't board a flight. In [other destinations](#), health officials might require you to stay in a government hospital for more than 10 days.

Pack as if you're going to get stuck, advised Amy Eckhardt, the owner of [World View Adventures](#), a travel agency based in Buffalo, N.Y. That might mean bringing two additional weeks of medication and your work laptop.

Ms. Eckhardt has yet to have a client test positive while abroad, but she's learned from her own experience. To celebrate her 40th birthday, she spent about a month and a half in Mexico last winter

before she had the opportunity to get vaccinated. For the final leg of her trip, she picked a resort in Costa Mujeres that offered free on-site testing and covered the costs of food and lodging during quarantine, if required.

When her results came back positive on Jan. 31, she said, hotel employees asked her to put on a “biohazard orange” wristband and to move from her oceanfront room to a basement room in “the quarantine section.” Because she was the hotel’s first guest to test positive, the staff was still figuring out how to handle such situations. Her resort stationed a guard outside her door, and initially she had to move to a new room across the hall every three days, while people in hazmat-like suits and goggles sanitized the room and placed new towels in the bathroom.

Fortunately, she never developed any serious symptoms and her primary obstacle was boredom, which she countered by posting detailed updates about the iguana on her patio and other humorous observations in a private Facebook group for travel agents. After completing her 10 days of quarantine, she tested negative and flew back to the United States.

How long does it take to test negative?

Someone infected with Covid will typically test positive for five to eight days, said Dr. Freedman of the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene.

In rare cases someone might test positive for as long as six weeks, even though the individual is no longer contagious, he said. There is a way to get around this in some cases. Many countries and airlines will accept a certificate of recovery from a doctor or health official in lieu of a test. Erika Richter, a spokeswoman for the American Society of Travel Advisors, a trade organization, urged people to review the [C.D.C.’s highly specific requirements](#) for that certificate.

Dr. Volk, the president of the College of American Pathologists, recommends that anyone who tests positive with an at-home or antigen test, follows up with a P.C.R. test, which is much more likely to give you a true positive.

Will travel insurance cover costs if I test positive?

It depends on the type of insurance. Some policies [will cover](#) additional airfare and lodging for up to seven days past your originally scheduled return date, effectively covering just a week of quarantine, my colleague Elaine Glusac explains in [this article on travel insurance](#). Some policies will also cover medical costs abroad, which are often excluded from traditional health insurance policies.

How do I avoid testing positive while traveling?

Taking the sorts of precautions you embraced before you were vaccinated — avoiding crowded indoor events and wearing a mask — would be wise.

“Vaccines are doing an amazing job of keeping people alive, but masks will keep people from getting infected,” said Dr. Milstone of Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

It’s also worth remembering that you need to start being extra cautious before you travel — if you’re infected shortly before you depart you might not test positive until you’re on your trip.

Jenny Mikkelsen, the vice president of [Travel Beyond](#), a luxury safari company, has seen this happen. The day after Thanksgiving, 10 Americans flew to Cape Town from Minneapolis. All of them had tested negative in the United States. In order to fly to Botswana for their safari, they had to take another test. One traveler tested positive. A couple of days later a second American traveler who had stayed behind with that traveler also tested positive. Given the timing, it seemed likely that the first traveler had been infected back in Minneapolis, Ms. Mikkelsen said. Neither developed symptoms during their quarantine in a luxury hotel, but they missed the safari. Once they both tested negative, they flew home.

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SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/16/us-hospitals-brace-for-potential-omicron-surge-in-january
GIST	<p>A wave of new Omicron cases is beginning to surge in America and could peak as early as January, the Centers for Disease Controls (CDC) has warned, as states are scrambling to prepare for overloaded hospitals. The US has passed 800,000 deaths, including 1 in 100 Americans over the age of 65.</p> <p>The Omicron variant accounted for nearly 3% of Covid cases in the US as of Saturday – up from only 0.4% the week before, according to data from the CDC. The variant is expected to continue rising rapidly, based on the experiences of other countries and could be dominant within weeks.</p> <p>“I suspect that those numbers are going to shoot up dramatically in the next couple of weeks,” Céline Gounder, infectious disease specialist and epidemiologist at New York University and Bellevue Hospital, told reporters on Wednesday. She expects an Omicron wave to peak in late January and then come down sometime in February.</p> <p>In a meeting with state health leaders on Tuesday, the CDC presented two scenarios, based on models, for how the variant might drive infections in the next few weeks and months. Omicron and Delta cases could peak as soon as January or a smaller surge of Omicron could happen in the spring.</p> <p>It’s unclear which variant, Delta or Omicron, will dominate in the next few months or if they will coexist, Gounder said. Regardless, “we anticipate an increase in hospitalizations, an increase in deaths and an increase in the burden on the health care system over the next couple of months.”</p> <p>The US was already in the grips of a Delta wave that began before the Thanksgiving holiday, and officials fear that travel and gatherings over holidays like Christmas and New Year’s could add explosive growth to an already strained situation.</p> <p>Schools across the US are seeing rises in cases, and some are closing early or cutting back on in-person activities. In New York, Cornell University reported 903 cases among students this week – many of them cases of the Omicron variant among fully vaccinated people. The school closed early and went virtual.</p> <p>In several states, hospitals are already close to being overwhelmed. In Michigan, intensivists are now volunteering to work for free in ICUs, one doctor reports.</p> <p>“Health care systems need to have a plan in place for what will likely be a surge in hospitalizations in the coming weeks,” Gounder said. “What are staffing plans, particularly over the holidays, when staff are going to want to take some time off themselves?” That may involve delaying elective procedures to reallocate staff, and working with agencies to bring in travel nurses and specialists as needed, she said.</p> <p>Public health officials should ramp up testing and surveillance across the country, she said.</p> <p>Some of the funds from the American Rescue Plan may be used at the state and local level for purchasing rapid tests, as Massachusetts and Colorado have begun doing. With Omicron, frequent testing may be more important than it was with previous variants, Gounder said.</p> <p>“Omicron has an even shorter incubation period of two to three days. If you want to have a reasonable chance of catching most of those infections and being able to do something about it, you really need to be testing every day.”</p> <p>Between 15 and 30% of all positive tests should be sequenced to understand which variants are spreading across the country, Gounder said. “We’ve dramatically ramped up the volume of testing, but we’re not where we need to be and it’s still a bit patchy across the country.” Wastewater surveillance can also be a “really useful tool to have your finger on the pulse of what’s coming and how quickly.”</p> <p>Joe Biden’s national plan for addressing Omicron specifically excludes restrictions like stay-at-home orders and the majority of states have seen their local health powers significantly curtailed during the pandemic, making it more difficult to enact emergency measures to slow the spread of the virus.</p>

Continuing to ramp up vaccinations, including initial doses and booster shots, will also be important to battling current and present waves. That will take a concerted campaign to educate the public on why it's important, for instance, to vaccinate newly eligible children.

Improving ventilation and air filtration is also important, and so is wearing high-quality masks, Gounder said. "People know about masks. They may not know, however, that KN-95s and KF-94s would be the preferred mask. How do you get them? How do you make sure they're the right kind?"

It is still too early to tell if Omicron is more or less deadly than previous variants. "The virulence really depends on the age of the person we're talking about, as well as other demographics, but age is probably the most important one," Gounder said. "With the early data coming out of South Africa, much of that was in young, relatively healthy, college-student-aged people."

But the evidence available does indicate the variant is more transmissible and immune-evasive, making infection more likely among those who are vaccinated or have recovered from earlier bouts with the virus. In the New York and New Jersey health zone, for instance, Omicron is present in 13% of cases.

A new study on previous variants [found](#) that 40% of people who test positive for SARS-CoV-2 are asymptomatic. Younger people are more likely not to have any symptoms, with 60% of people under 20 never developing any symptoms – but they are still able to pass the virus on.

Nearly two years into the coronavirus outbreak, people are tired – of the virus, of staying home, of schools closing unexpectedly and hospitals canceling elective surgeries. But Gounder warned against complacency as cases surge and health systems buckle.

"This is exhausting," she said. For "those of us who are on the frontlines, whether in health care or public health, this is something we're going to be dealing with for decades to come. This is our new normal – quite literally, this is our life."

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HEADLINE	12/17 Expert: Covid 'viral blizzard' to hit US
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/17/health/us-coronavirus-friday/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)With Covid-19 hospitalizations rising as the holiday season gets into full swing, experts are urging people to take precautionary measures against a new variant that may quickly sweep the nation.</p> <p>While the Delta variant is still a worrying presence, there could be millions of more Americans infected within weeks due to the high transmissibility of the Omicron variant, said Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota.</p> <p>"I think we're really just about to experience a viral blizzard," Osterholm told CNN's Erin Burnett on Thursday. "I think in the next three to eight weeks, we're going to see millions of Americans are going to be infected with this virus, and that will be overlaid on top of Delta, and we're not yet sure exactly how that's going to work out."</p> <p>With so many possible cases from Omicron -- which scientists believe to be more contagious though most cases so far appear to be mild -- there will be a serious strain on the health care system as more workers will likely get sick, Osterholm said.</p> <p>"What you have here right now is a potential perfect storm," Osterholm said. "I've been very concerned about the fact that we could easily see a quarter or a third of our health care workers quickly becoming cases themselves."</p>

Andy Slavitt, a former senior pandemic adviser to President Joe Biden, said that while tools such as vaccines are [now available](#) rather than during last winter's surge, "a very rough January" lies ahead due to Omicron.

"For the health care workers, the hospitals, for people who are sick, even sick with things other than Covid, that represents a real danger and a real threat," Slavitt told CNN's Don Lemon on Thursday.

Various sectors of American life are already showing signs of strain. Some colleges and universities [are returning](#) to online learning. Sports leagues are [postponing games](#) due to players testing positive, and [live shows](#) in theaters are canceling performances.

Long lines for Covid-19 testing were seen Thursday in metro areas such as New York, Boston and Miami. With Christmas and New Year's Eve approaching -- and the accompanying [travel](#) to see friends and families -- getting vaccinated or boosted remains key.

Recent lab studies of blood that was taken from vaccinated people and exposed to engineered copies of Omicron showed that the variant can evade some protection offered by two doses of Moderna's Covid-19 vaccine, but a booster dose restores much of that immunity, [researchers reported](#) Wednesday. The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine has shown [similar results](#).

The daily rate of vaccinations is up around 22% from a month prior, [according to](#) data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, with more than half of vaccinations being booster doses. At the current pace, it will take more than two months for at least half of adults to get a Covid-19 booster, according to a CNN analysis of CDC data.

Biden said Thursday that vaccinations and boosters are essential to keeping businesses and holiday gatherings safe.

"For the unvaccinated, we are looking at a winter of severe illness and death," he said. "But there's good news if you're vaccinated and you have your booster shot, you're protected from severe illness and death."

Even with the [potential spread](#) of the Omicron variant, former Obama White House health policy adviser Dr. Zeke Emanuel said that the US has tools to fight Covid-19 unlike during its onset.

"In March 2020, we didn't understand a lot about coronavirus. Second of all, we have vaccines now. We have the ability to change those vaccines. We're getting oral therapeutics. We have much better tests and test availability. None of that's perfect, but it's much better than it was in March 2020," Emanuel told CNN's Michael Smerconish on Thursday.

Continued research into [additional drugs](#) to fight coronavirus is ongoing.

Merck's Covid-19 antiviral, molnupiravir, lowers the risk of hospitalization or death in high-risk unvaccinated adults by 30%, according to a statement issued after publication of its [clinical trial data](#) in the New England Journal of Medicine.

Among people who got the treatment, the risk of hospitalization and death was 6.8%, compared with 9.7% among people who got a placebo, the study said. There was one death in the treatment group, compared with nine deaths in the placebo group.

While successes are being found in some treatments pre- and post-infection, the rates of severe disease and death for those vaccinated continue to prove much lower even with [data showing](#) vaccines' reduced effectiveness against certain variants.

"Given the increased risk related to the Delta and Omicron variant, it is important to increase uptake of primary vaccination and booster doses in all eligible populations," said Heather Scobie, a member of the CDC's Enhanced Surveillance Epidemiology Task Force Covid-19 Emergency Response.

HEADLINE	12/16 Coronavirus wave shutters schools again
SOURCE	https://www.thedailybeast.com/missouri-dc-maryland-new-york-city-schools-close-early-over-coronavirus-as-omicron-surges?ref=home
GIST	<p>As states scramble to contain a fresh surge of COVID-19 cases that may only worsen with the holiday season and the emergence of the Omicron variant, schools are once again shutting their doors to curtail the spread of the deadly disease.</p> <p>In Maryland, at least three schools announced they were closing their doors early after reporting a COVID-19 outbreak, while several schools in the District of Columbia area have also moved to online learning to contain an ongoing outbreak. A few states away, in New York City, the Department of Education has shuttered over 800 classrooms amid a mass surge of COVID-19 cases in the area.</p> <p>School officials in Missouri have also been forced to start the holiday season early, a grim combination of both COVID-19 exposures and an ongoing battle with the state's attorney general over pandemic mitigation measures.</p> <p>"It's already ramping back up," Michael Allgood, a high-school teacher in Hannibal, Missouri, told The Daily Beast. "I can easily teach virtually through Google meets and Zoom though, so it is what it is."</p> <p>The stated reason for the mass closures, which echo waves of school closures earlier in the pandemic, vary by jurisdiction. And schools closed early and often this same academic year in states like Mississippi, where vaccination rates are low.</p> <p>But even as the country boasts an approximately 60 percent vaccination rate—by the old standard of two doses of the MRNA vaccines, at least—the emergence of the Omicron variant has local and federal officials worried about a possible tsunami of cases nationwide.</p> <p>The World Health Organization this week admitted that while Omicron, first detected in South Africa, was spreading faster than its variant predecessors, it does not appear, with what limited data is available, to be producing as many severe cases. Dr. Anthony Fauci also noted to CNN this week that the next COVID wave can still be mitigated by inoculations.</p> <p>"We are already in a Delta surge. I mean, the cases are going up," the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases said of the variant that remains dominant, at least for now, in the United States. "And then you have, looking over your shoulder, the Omicron variant, which we know from what's going on in South Africa and in the U.K., is a highly transmissible virus."</p> <p>In New York City, however, at least one school has also totally closed its doors, according to city data. The move comes as local education officials reported 546 new cases in the school system on Thursday.</p> <p>"In some areas like NYC, there is evidence of increasing Omicron present at higher percentages. But Delta is still a major force nationally," Dr. Amesh Adalja, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security and a specialist in infectious diseases, told The Daily Beast.</p> <p>Adalja added that some schools have "policies in place for quarantine with exposure and case thresholds" that could also trigger closures. In Missouri, closures in at least two schools have also been attributed to staffing shortages.</p> <p>In Nodaway County, which has one of the highest infection states in the state, the school board unanimously voted this week to cancel school though the holiday break in order to band-aid the problem of having no teachers. The Polo School District also agreed to start their break on Thursday "due to the large capacity of illness that our elementary and lower middle school is experiencing," the school said.</p>

The closure for the Caldwell County school came one day after Polo Superintendent Kyle Ross [revealed in a letter to parents](#) that due to a court ruling, the local health department no longer had to require students exposed to COVID-19 to stay home from school.

“The pandemic has harmed children not because of the virus, but because of what adults have done to them,” Adalja added.

In the nation’s capital, politics does not seem to have played as large a role in the closures of schools so much as sheer pandemic pain.

Whittier Elementary, a public school in Northwest D.C., announced on Wednesday it would shift to online learning for a week after a recent surge in COVID-19 cases. The decision to close ahead of the winter break, with plans to resume classes on Jan. 3, came after at least 14 cases were reported at the school.

“The decision to shift the entire school to virtual instruction for the next week did not come lightly,” the school’s Principal Tiffany Johnson [said in a letter to parents](#). “However, with many students required to quarantine and limited staffing availability, virtual learning will allow all students to end the calendar year strong.”

Next-door, in Maryland, at least three schools have also begun closures due to COVID-19 cases. As the [Baltimore Sun](#) reported, 15 of 24 public-school in Maryland are experiencing a spike in cases after the state reported its highest academic positivity surge this year. The move has also prompted others to cancel extracurriculars, athletic activities, or else move to a partially-virtual system.

The trio of schools closing, all in Prince George’s County, said they would move to virtual learning after “this week, we saw a high of 155 cases reported in a single day,” [the district’s CEO explained in a Wednesday letter](#).

“The recent surge of cases locally, nationally, and statewide is beginning to impact our ability to deliver instruction at various schools, leading to entire grades in quarantine and some school buildings to close,” Dr. Monica Goldson added in the letter.

Georgetown Preparatory School, a private school in Montgomery County, announced last week that it, too, would transition to virtual learning before its two-week holiday break after 30 students tested positive for the deadly disease.

In Olney, Maryland, [Our Lady of Good Counsel High School](#) also announced it would end the semester early after at least 21 confirmed cases. The school’s president said in a letter to parents that the “significant increase” has also prompted the Catholic institution to delay midterm exams, which were set to begin on Wednesday, until after the new year.

For Genevieve Kanter, an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine, the decision for some schools to close their doors early might be just a matter of timing.

“Since we are so close to winter break anyway, districts may be deciding that closing a week or two ahead of schedule won’t have too many other knock-on effects for parents and families,” Kanter told The Daily Beast. “Schools generally have thresholds based on either school-based cases and positive tests or community COVID rates for triggering classroom or school-based closures, and it looks like they are hitting those thresholds.”

Kanter, however, added that these closures stem from a combination of things, including “the greater transmissibility of Omicron, the imperfect protection conferred by vaccination in the face of Omicron, the cold weather forcing people to stay indoors in spaces that are not well ventilated, and increased levels of noncompliance with regard to proper mask-wearing and eating and drinking because people are simply growing tired of the additional precautions they’re asked to take.”

	So even if there are early indicators that deaths will not reach the same disastrous levels they did a year ago thanks to vaccines, parents, teachers, and teachers might be forgiven for experiencing a nightmarish sense of déjà vu.
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HEADLINE	12/16 TikTok challenge: school shooting threats
SOURCE	https://nypost.com/2021/12/16/tiktok-challenge-warns-of-alleged-school-shooting-threats/
GIST	<p>An anonymous threat made on TikTok has US school districts on high alert.</p> <p>The threat, which is also being reported as a “challenge,” claims that multiple school shootings will take place on Friday.</p> <p>As a result, numerous schools across the nation have increased security and issued letters to parents as a precaution. Authorities, however, have deemed the threat to be fake.</p> <p>“Law enforcement agencies have investigated this threat and determined that it originated in Arizona and is not credible,” the official Baltimore County Public Schools Twitter account tweeted Thursday regarding schools in Maryland’s most populous city.</p> <p>Still, many parents are being alerted and asked to talk with their kids about the matter.</p> <p>“Parents, we are asking you to discuss this with your children,” the deputy superintendent of Wisconsin’s Waukesha School District wrote in a letter obtained by Fox 6 Milwaukee. “We take all threats seriously and any threats against the school or district will be disciplined to the greatest extent possible, up to and including expulsion from school.”</p> <p>The current threats were not specifically aimed at the school district, the superintendent clarified.</p> <p>As of late November, there had been 32 school shootings in the US in 2021 that resulted in injury or death, according to Education Week. However, 2020 only saw 10 school shootings amid the pandemic. While many school heads are encouraging parents to immediately report any and all threats they hear of, certain districts are now being deluged with calls.</p> <p>“Many of our schools are being inundated with parent calls this morning asking about these latest threats and their validity,” Florida’s Citrus County School District tweeted of the situation. “As of Thursday morning, we have not received any indication of a credible threat to any of our schools.”</p> <p>In Arizona, the Scottsdale Unified School District also emphasized that the TikTok threats for Friday are not credible but that schools are taking extra precautions anyway.</p> <p>“You may notice an increased police presence on and around our campuses today and tomorrow,” the district said, according to Fox, noting that it “takes all threats seriously.”</p> <p>In New York, Oneida County Sheriff Robert Maciol said area schools will have an increased police presence Friday, Syracuse reported.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Calif. vaccinated workers face restrictions
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/california-rules-end-distinction-vaccinated-workers-81784107
GIST	<p>SACRAMENTO, Calif. -- In a move criticized by business groups and hailed by labor advocates, California's workplace regulators on Thursday extended the state's coronavirus pandemic regulations into next year with revisions that employers said could worsen the state's severe labor shortage.</p> <p>Vaccinated and unvaccinated employees in the most populous U.S. state will be treated the same under the California Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board's revised rules.</p>

Both will be prohibited from the workplace if they come in close contact with someone infected with the virus under the rules that take effect from Jan. 14 and are set to last for three months.

The new rules mark a reversal from the state's current coronavirus workplace regulation. The current rules allow vaccinated employees to keep working at workplaces even if they've been exposed, unless they show symptoms — under the assumption that the vaccine generally will protect them.

The revised temporary rules require that exposed workers who are vaccinated but asymptomatic stay home for 14 days even if they test negative or return to work but wear masks and stay 6 feet (1.8 meters) from others for two weeks.

The seven-member safety board is the policy-making arm of what is known as Cal/OSHA. It adopted the revised rules without discussion on a 6-1 vote.

Business groups argued the new rules will be particularly onerous for small businesses including restaurants and retailers.

“Treating vaccinated and unvaccinated people similarly really denies the scientific value of the vaccine and disincentivizes vaccination,” said Rob Moutrie, a policy advocate for the California Chamber of Commerce.

But groups representing California workers supported the changes. Mitch Steiger, a legislative advocate for the California Labor Federation, said regulators last summer were foolish to loosen COVID-19 workplace restrictions put in place earlier during the pandemic.

“It’s good that we’re realizing that vaccines aren’t the silver bullet to get us out of this,” Steiger said. “There’s never a good time to start disarming against COVID-19.”

The safety board’s adoption of the revised rules came a day after California reinstituted requiring vaccinated and unvaccinated people to wear masks indoors in a bid to slow the spread of the virus, including the omicron variant, as families and friends gather for the holidays and new coronavirus cases increase.

Safety board members recognized “the science that vaccinated people can transmit the virus, and early reports show that to be especially true with omicron,” said Saskia Kim, speaking for the California Nurses Association.

Other states besides California that have adopted emergency COVID-19 workplace safety measures include Michigan, Oregon and Virginia.

The Biden Administration has ordered all U.S. employers with more than 100 workers to be vaccinated, tested regularly or wear masks at work starting Jan. 4. But the order is stalled amid court challenges from Republican-led states and fears among employers that the rules could make the worker shortage worse.

The California Chamber of Commerce led a coalition of about 60 business groups arguing in a letter to the state safety board that vaccinations are still largely effective and usually prevent serious illness and death even if there are breakthrough infections.

The groups warned that the new rules to require testing of vaccinated workers with no symptoms could strain the availability of rapid tests and boost employers’ costs. The rules apply to almost every workplace in the state, including offices, factories and retail locations.

The stricter safeguards “will only worsen the present labor shortage affecting California workplaces,” Moutrie predicted. “Moreover, reinstituting social distancing on a per person basis is just not feasible in many work places” that would have to physically move workstations or equipment.

California has a huge entertainment business sector and Motion Picture Association of America vice president and senior counsel Melissa Patack told the board that the rules aren't feasible for filming movies, television shows or commercials because "actors cannot wear masks while performing."

She added that workers doing hair and makeup for actors cannot stay six feet (1.8 meters) apart, so the new rules "could result in the shutdown of many productions."

While California's labor groups generally backed the workplace changes involving vaccinated and unvaccinated workers, they are upset that other proposed rules to be considered in March would eliminate mandatory employer-paid sick leave for workers who get infected with the virus or are exposed to it.

That temporary rule is aimed at allowing lower-wage workers without sick time to take time off rather than spreading the virus at work because they couldn't afford to stay home.

Doing away with it would mean that "workers will be forced to make the impossible decision of going to work while sick or staying home without pay," Stephen Knight, executive director of the labor advocacy group WorkSafe said in an online petition to the Cal/OSHA Standards Board.

Labor advocates could also work through the state budget process, Legislature and governor to keep the program, but prefer to retain the existing requirement, Knight and Steiger said.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Covid fears dash hopes for holiday season
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/holidays-approach-covid-casts-pall-celebrations-81800352
GIST	<p>Lines again stretch around blocks at some COVID-19 testing sites. Refrigerated mobile morgues are on order, and parts of Europe are re-tightening borders amid a winter spike in coronavirus infections.</p> <p>This year's holiday season was supposed to be a do-over for last year's subdued celebrations. Instead it's turning into a redux of restrictions, cancellations and rising angst over the never-ending pandemic.</p> <p>"This year, more than ever, everyone needed a holiday," said John McNulty, owner of Thief, a Brooklyn bar that had to close for a day earlier this week because of an infected employee.</p> <p>As Christmas and New Year's approach, a pall lingers over the season. Infections are soaring around the world, and the quickly spreading omicron variant has triggered new restrictions on travel and public gatherings reminiscent of the dark days of 2020.</p> <p>The accelerating cancellations seem "to have thrown us back into that sort of zombie world of the first week of March of the pandemic last year," said Jonathan Neame, the chief executive of Shepherd Neame, Britain's oldest brewery and chain of pubs.</p> <p>New York Mayor Bill de Blasio said Thursday that the city would "watch very carefully" whether to press ahead with plans to welcome a fully vaccinated crowd back to Times Square on New Year's Eve, a celebration that was canceled last year. It's a go for now, the mayor said.</p> <p>Multiple Broadway shows, including "Hamilton," "Mrs. Doubtfire" and "Harry Potter and the Cursed Child," called off performances in recent days because of virus cases in their all-vaccinated casts and crews. California and New York brought back indoor mask mandates.</p> <p>In Philadelphia, Health Commissioner Cheryl Bettigole urged residents not to go to indoor holiday parties, calling them "just too dangerous." She ruefully advised against even getting together with other households for Christmas.</p> <p>"It's hard, and it feels impossible, and it feels unfair," she acknowledged, but "I have to say it."</p>

Many Americans have spent nearly two years on an emotional seesaw as the pandemic worsened and waned in cycles and the hoped-for return to normal was repeatedly pushed back. A recent poll by MTV Entertainment Group and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that nearly half of American adults said the pandemic made it harder to maintain their mental health.

“I think for a large number of people, there was this hopefulness that this holiday season was going to be different. So if you went in with that expectation, and you weren’t adjusting it over the last couple of months, I think you’re going to be all the more disappointed,” said Dr. Vaile Wright, a clinical psychologist who works for the American Psychological Association.

Her advice? “Try to get to a place where the expectation is that this is going to continue on for a while, and if you’re feeling stuck, try to find ways to make your life meaningful right now.”

The world has been on edge over the omicron variant, which could become the dominant strain of coronavirus in weeks in many nations. Adding to that anxiety is the fact that hospitals in many U.S. states are already slammed with patients infected with the delta variant. The military and the National Guard have been enlisted to help at hospitals.

Refrigerated mobile morgues, a grim symbol of the early pandemic, are making a comeback. In Arizona, one county voted this week to spend \$65,000 on a mobile morgue because virus deaths have far exceeded capacity. A hospital in Akron, Ohio, brought in a trailer to more than triple its morgue space, Cleveland television station WKYC reported.

Some people are striving to keep fears in check.

Yvonne Sidella, a “50-something” from Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania, views the steep rise in cases and the looming threat of omicron with equanimity. She does not plan to let it alter holiday plans that include spending time with her elderly parents, her four children and her eight grandchildren.

“I’m not going to let this blow my spirit,” said Sidella, a manufacturing supervisor. “I’m going to continue to live my life. I’m not going to let this here thing have me afraid to go places or to do things or to touch people.”

After last winter’s brutal COVID-19 surge forced him to skip his usual Christmas trip home to visit family and friends in the Midwest, Don Carlson booked plane tickets in September. The college administrator in San Francisco figured with vaccinations available and a lower number of infections, the trip to Minneapolis and Nebraska would be fine.

Soon after, hospitals started filing up in the Midwest. Then came the discovery of the omicron variant.

Carlson, 59, couldn’t in good conscience make the trip, so he canceled. He will stay in Northern California and get together with a few vaccinated friends for small dinners around the holiday. He plans to do Zoom calls with the friends and relatives he would have visited.

“It’s disappointing, but what would be far more disappointing is spreading it to an elderly person in your family because you went through airports,” Carlson said. “I think it’s just prudent to stay put.”

Dakota LeRoy, a 25-year-old product designer in Manhattan who is fully vaccinated, had reasoned that it would be safe to go to a Christmas-themed dive bar to celebrate a new job last week. But on Wednesday she found she was infected with COVID-19, after a scratchy throat and some sniffles prompted her to get tested before a holiday visit with her boyfriend’s family in Boston.

“Everyone I know is either positive or has been in direct contact with somebody who is,” she said.

	<p>April Burns, a bill collector for New York City, said things are far from being back to normal. But she considers the worst to be over.</p> <p>“Last year, everybody was shut down. At least now, things are open, you know. You can get out more, and you still get to see people,” said Burns, who is unvaccinated and was standing in line Thursday near Wall Street to comply with city rules that require her to be tested weekly.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Las Vegas: NYE fireworks event returns
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/vegas-strip-hold-years-fireworks-2020-hiaitus-81796860
GIST	<p>LAS VEGAS -- New Year's Eve fireworks that were called off last year on the Las Vegas Strip due to the coronavirus pandemic are returning with hopes for big crowds, even as the emerging omicron variant spreads in more states.</p> <p>Tourism and elected officials, most wearing masks, stood Thursday on an indoor stage with sparkling pyrotechnics and a background emblazoned with “2022” to announce the Deuces Wild-themed event and the addition of an eighth hotel-top fireworks launching spot.</p> <p>“Aside from last year, ‘America’s Party’ has been the culminating event of the entire year for more than 20 years,” said Pat Christenson, president of Las Vegas Events, a nonprofit agency created to produce and support big events.</p> <p>Thousands of revelers still congregated on casino-lined Las Vegas Boulevard to ring in 2021 despite the canceled fireworks. There was no mention during Thursday's event of the possible effect of the emergence and spread in recent weeks of the omicron variant of COVID-19.</p> <p>Reported cases of COVID-19 have generally declined in Nevada in recent weeks, including in and around Las Vegas. But health officials reported the first identified case of a person with the omicron variant in the state this week in the Las Vegas area.</p> <p>Nationwide, at least 36 states have detected the variant as the delta virus continues surging in many places. Experts said Tuesday that an omicron surge is probably already underway in the United States, outpacing the nation’s ability to track it.</p> <p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said this week that omicron accounted for about 3% of genetically-sequenced coronaviruses nationally. Percentages vary by region, with the highest — 13% — in the New York/New Jersey area.</p> <p>Nevada has reported 8,263 people dead from the coronavirus since the pandemic began in March 2020, including 6,358 in Las Vegas and surrounding Clark County.</p> <p>Masks are required for everyone indoors in Clark County unless they are actively eating or drinking, although compliance is not universal. All but two of Nevada's 17 counties have similar rules.</p> <p>Almost 70% of eligible people in the Las Vegas area have received at least one shot of coronavirus vaccine, and 55% are fully vaccinated, according to the local health district. Statewide, health officials put those numbers at 63% and almost 54%, respectively.</p> <p>The Southern Nevada Health District reported a seven-day test positivity rate of 9.8% in the Las Vegas area. The measure of the number of people tested for coronavirus and found positive was 6.8% in mid-October. The World Health Organization goal is 5% or below to relax restrictions.</p> <p>Fireworks were first held on the Strip on the last night of 2000. The display has helped make New Year's Eve one of Las Vegas' biggest events, drawing more than 300,000 revelers, according to tourism officials, and filling more than 250,000 hotel rooms.</p>

	<p>“Being able to host this event again is so special because it allows us to close out the year in a memorable way,” Christenson said in a statement accompanying Thursday’s announcement.</p> <p>Fireworks by Grucci designs and choreographs the eight-minute pyrotechnic display from atop resort properties that last year included MGM Grand, Aria, Planet Hollywood, Caesars Palace, Treasure Island, Venetian and The STRAT tower. It is accompanied by a soundtrack airing on two on FM radio stations in Las Vegas.</p> <p>This year the show will add Resorts World Las Vegas, which opened last June.</p> <p>A Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority executive, H. Fletch Brunelle, noted that entertainers booked at various venues for New Year’s weekend include Bruno Mars, Katy Perry, Maroon 5 and Usher.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Omicron dominant strain Orange Co. Florida
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/omicron-dominant-wastewater-samples-florida-county-81793644
GIST	<p>ORLANDO, Fla. -- Even though there have been practically no cases of clinical infection, wastewater samples show that the new omicron variant is now the dominant strain of COVID-19 in the Florida county that is home to the nation's largest theme park resorts, officials said this week.</p> <p>The omicron variant has quickly surpassed the delta variant in collections taken from wastewater sampling sites in Orange County, officials said.</p> <p>A sampling this week showed that omicron represented almost 100% of the strains in the samples from the wastewater facilities, Orange County Utilities spokesperson Sarah Lux said in an email.</p> <p>It's a different story when it comes to people seeking treatment for COVID-19, officials said.</p> <p>“Those who are hospitalized are being primarily infected by the delta variant,” Orange County Mayor Jerry Demings said Wednesday at a news conference held at the Orlando International Airport.</p> <p>Although tourist numbers have dropped since the start of the pandemic, tens of millions still travel to Orlando each year to visit the area's famous theme parks, including Walt Disney World and Universal Orlando.</p> <p>Scientists have said omicron is more contagious than delta, but it’s unclear whether omicron’s rapid spread will overwhelm hospitals. They said it’s too soon to draw conclusions since the variant is quite new and hospitalizations can lag weeks behind infections.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Soaring infections rattle Europe, fuel dread
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/british-surge-warning-omicron-responses-vary-81787572
GIST	<p>LONDON -- Soaring infections in Britain driven in part by the omicron variant of the coronavirus rattled Europe on Thursday, prompting new restrictions on the Continent and fueling a familiar dread on both sides of the Atlantic about entering a new phase of the pandemic just in time for the holidays.</p> <p>Much remains unknown about omicron, but officials increasingly warn that it appears more transmissible than the delta variant, which has already put pressure on hospitals worldwide. With so many questions unanswered, uncertainty reigned over how quickly and how severely to crack down on Christmas travel and year-end parties.</p> <p>After the U.K. recorded its highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections since the pandemic began, France announced Thursday that it would tighten entry rules for those coming from Britain. Hours</p>

later, the country set another record, with a further 88,376 confirmed COVID-19 cases reported Thursday, almost 10,000 more than the day before.

In England, the chief medical officer urged people to limit who they see in the festive period. Pubs and restaurants said many people were heeding that advice by canceling Christmas parties, though there has been much debate about what's OK to do. In the U.S., the White House insisted there was no need for a lockdown, despite signs that omicron was gaining ground there.

Globally, more than 75 countries have reported confirmed cases of the new variant. In Britain, where omicron cases are doubling every two to three days, omicron was expected to soon replace delta as the dominant strain in the country. The government has accelerated its booster program in response. Authorities in the 27-nation European Union say omicron will be the dominant variant in the bloc by mid-January.

Early data suggests that omicron may be milder but better at evading vaccines — making booster shots more crucial. Experts have urged caution in particular about drawing conclusions because hospitalizations lag behind infections and because many variables contribute to how sick people get.

Even if omicron proves milder on the whole than delta, it may disarm some of the lifesaving tools available and put immune-compromised and elderly people at particular risk. And if it's more transmissible, more infections overall raise the risk that more cases will be serious.

While experts gather the data, some governments rushed to act, while others sought to calm fears that the new variant would land countries back on square one.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson insisted Thursday that the situation in the U.K. is different from last year because of the widespread use of vaccines and the ability to test.

If people want to attend an event “the sensible thing to do is to get a test and to make sure that you’re being cautious,” he said.

“But we’re not saying that we want to cancel stuff. We’re not locking stuff down, and the fastest route back to normality is to get boosted,” he said.

Professor Chris Whitty, England’s chief medical officer, struck a more cautious note, advising people earlier in the week to limit their social contacts.

On Thursday, he told a parliamentary committee hearing that the government could have to review measures if vaccines prove less effective than expected against omicron.

He said that “would be a material change to how ministers viewed the risks going forward.”

Among those taking the more cautious route was Queen Elizabeth II, who opted to cancel her traditional pre-Christmas family lunch.

In the United States, President Joe Biden's administration said tighter restrictions are not planned. He said the omicron variant is not spreading as fast as in Europe because of steps his administration has taken.

However, he warned that unvaccinated Americans faced “a winter of severe illness and death.”

White House coronavirus response coordinator Jeff Zients said that the U.S. was “in a very different and stronger place than we were a year ago.”

Still, feelings of unease persisted among some people.

Michael Stohl, 32, was relieved when he got the Pfizer vaccine last spring, but the spread of omicron has turned his optimism to dread.

“Even though I’m fully vaccinated right now, that doesn’t seem to give me any sort of guarantee anymore,” he said. “It just puts this anxiety over you because they tell you the boosters will work, but that’s what they said about the original vaccines. Am I going to have to keep getting vaccinated every couple months?”

He said he booked an appointment to receive his booster shot Thursday morning.

Stohl, who works at the concierge desk at an apartment building in downtown Washington, said his family all lives in the city so he isn’t traveling for Christmas. However, he worries about friends and coworkers who will travel.

“I just remember how bad everything was last year, and it’s looking like it might be that bad again,” he said.

People in the Netherlands, meanwhile, have been in a partial lockdown since November to curb a delta-driven surge. While infection numbers are now declining, the government this week ordered elementary schools to close for Christmas a week early amid fears of a new rise. Authorities also sped up a booster campaign as caretaker Prime Minister Mark Rutte cited Britain as an example of how swiftly the variant can spread.

EU leaders gathering in Brussels for a summit Thursday sought to balance tackling the surge of infections across the continent while keeping borders open with common policies throughout the bloc.

“Let’s try to maintain the European solution,” Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said. “If every country goes it alone again, we’ll be even further from home.”

But ahead of the meeting, European nations already were acting to rein in the spread. Greece and Italy tightened entry requirements for travelers earlier this week, and Portugal decided to keep stricter border controls in place beyond their planned Jan. 9 end.

France said Thursday that it will slap restrictions on travelers arriving from the U.K. — which is no longer part of the EU — putting limits on reasons for traveling and requiring 48 hours of isolation upon arrival. The new measures will take effect early Saturday.

French Prime Minister Jean Castex said the measures were being imposed “in the face of the extremely rapid spread of the omicron variant in the U.K.”

The abrupt move comes after weeks of political tensions between France and Britain over fishing rights and how to deal with migration across the English Channel. The French government is desperately trying to avoid a new lockdown that would hurt the economy and cloud President Emmanuel Macron’s expected reelection campaign.

Waiting outside a Paris train station, Constantin Dobrynin said that he sometimes felt governments over-reacted and imposed unnecessary measures. As for omicron, it wasn’t yet clear how serious it would be.

“So we should be balanced, and we shouldn’t be panicked,” he said.

Britain said it was not planning reciprocal measures.

Fearing a raft of canceled parties and a general drop in business at the height of the crucial and lucrative Christmas season, British restaurants and pubs demanded government help Thursday. They said concerns about the new variant have already wiped out 2 billion pounds (\$2.6 billion) in sales over the last 10 days.

	<p>Across London, restaurants that would normally see bustling crowds clinking glasses and tucking into festive meals were reporting droves of cancellations and empty rooms.</p> <p>“It’s a complete nightmare. ... This week should be the busiest week of the year for hospitality,” said Sally Abé, a chef at the Conrad Hotel in central London. “It’s everywhere, everybody’s canceling, but there’s no support from the government.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Schools step up security: threats on TikTok
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/schools-step-security-response-threats-tiktok-81801894
GIST	<p>Educators announced plans to increase security in response to TikTok posts warning of shooting and bomb threats at schools around the country Friday as officials assured parents the viral posts were not considered credible.</p> <p>The social media threats had many educators on edge as they circulated in the aftermath of a deadly school shooting in Michigan, which has been followed by numerous copycat threats to schools elsewhere.</p> <p>School officials in states including Arizona, Connecticut, Illinois, Montana, New York and Pennsylvania said Thursday there would be an increased police presence because of the threats.</p> <p>The vague, anonymous posts circulating online warned that multiple schools would receive shooting and bomb threats.</p> <p>“We are writing to inform you and not alarm you,” Oak Park and River Forest, Illinois, school administrators said in an email to parents. “We have been made aware of a nationwide viral TikTok trend about ‘school shooting and bomb threats for every school in the USA even elementary’ on Friday, December 17.”</p> <p>The administrators said local police departments would increase their presence around schools “out of an abundance of caution.”</p> <p>In a statement on Twitter, TikTok said it was working with law enforcement to investigate.</p> <p>“We handle even rumored threats with utmost seriousness,” the statement said, “which is why we’re working with law enforcement to look into warnings about potential violence at schools even though we have not found evidence of such threats originating or spreading via TikTok.”</p> <p>At least a few districts announced plans to close school buildings Friday, including Gilroy High School in northern California. Gilroy police said they had found threats on social media not to be credible, but school officials said final exams scheduled for Friday, the last day before winter break, would be postponed to January out of an abundance of caution.</p> <p>“Making the decision to cancel classes tomorrow has not been an easy one,” Principal Greg Kapaku said in a message to parents.</p> <p>The posts follow a disturbing trend that has had students acting out in response to social media challenges. In September, students across the U.S. posted videos of themselves vandalizing school bathrooms and stealing soap dispensers as part of the “devious licks” challenge.</p> <p>In October, students were challenged to slap a teacher, prompting the National Education Association to call on the leaders of Facebook, Twitter and TikTok to intervene.</p> <p>The Michigan State Police, among law enforcement agencies responding to the posts, said in a statement Thursday it was unaware of any credible threats.</p>

	<p>Internet companies such as TikTok are generally exempt from liability under U.S. law for the material users post on their networks, thanks in large part to the legal “safe harbor” they are given by Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act.</p> <p>“It would be unlikely that TikTok would be liable if there were actually to be a shooting,” said Jeff Kosseff, who wrote a book about Section 230 and teaches cybersecurity law at the U.S. Naval Academy. “Even without 230, there are just a lot of barriers against being able to bring a cause of action against the medium on which a threat was posted.”</p> <p>But Kosseff, who got a warning about the TikTok challenge Thursday from his daughter’s school district in Arlington, Virginia, said that doesn’t mean TikTok can’t do something about it.</p> <p>“They have a lot of flexibility to be doing the right thing and taking down harmful content. I am hopeful they are doing that,” he said.</p> <p>The threats outraged educators around the country.</p> <p>“Whether done as a joke or with malicious intent, it’s unacceptable. We know our school personnel will do everything in their power to keep our students safe,” officials with the Iowa State Education Association, the Iowa Association of School Boards and School Administrators of Iowa said in a joint statement.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Quebec orders new pandemic restrictions
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/quebec-orders-shops-bars-restaurants-operate-50-81803451
GIST	<p>TORONTO -- Bars, restaurants, stores and entertainment venues across the Canadian province of Quebec will be required to operate at 50% capacity beginning Monday because of a surge in coronavirus cases from the new omicron variant.</p> <p>The rule was announced Thursday by Quebec Premier François Legault as part of a series of new pandemic restrictions after forecasts that hospitals in the province could reach capacity for COVID-19 patients within weeks.</p> <p>Quebec reported 2,736 new coronavirus cases for the previous 24 hours — the highest daily number since Jan. 8. Legault said health officials expect to announce 3,700 new infections Friday.</p> <p>In addition to capping capacity for retail establishments, Quebec is requiring churches and other faith venues to also keep to half capacity. Worshipers will be required to show proof of vaccination to enter.</p> <p>Workplace parties are now banned as are dancing and singing karaoke inside bars, clubs and restaurants. The premier also reversed a decision to allow bigger indoor private gatherings ahead of Christmas, keeping the maximum at 10 people instead of raising it to 20 on Dec. 23.</p> <p>Legault refused to rule out reinstating a curfew. Quebec had a curfew from January to May.</p> <p>The Montreal Canadiens announced that their National Hockey League game against the Philadelphia Flyers would be played without fans following a request from Quebec health officials.</p> <p>In Ontario, meanwhile, a group of experts advising that province on the pandemic released new data that they say shows public health measures must cut contacts in half if the province is to avoid having 10,000 daily virus cases in the holiday season.</p> <p>“This will likely be the hardest wave of the pandemic,” said Dr. Adalsteinn Brown. “If we want to blunt this wave — please note that I say blunt it, not flatten — we will need to reduce contacts between people.”</p>

	Ontario reported 2,421 new virus infections — its highest since mid-May. It also recorded nine more COVID-19 deaths, pushing Canada past 30,000 deaths since the pandemic began.
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HEADLINE	12/16 Russia draft security pacts to US
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/russia-hands-draft-security-pacts-us-expects-quick-81786647
GIST	<p>MOSCOW -- The Kremlin said Thursday that Russia submitted draft documents outlining security arrangements it wants to negotiate with the United States and its NATO allies amid spiraling tensions over Ukraine.</p> <p>Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said a senior Russian envoy stood ready to immediately depart for talks in a neutral country on the proposal.</p> <p>Peskov told reporters that Russian President Vladimir Putin may have another call with U.S. President Joe Biden before the year's end to discuss the security issue, but he said it hasn't been agreed to yet.</p> <p>In a video call with Putin last week, Biden voiced concern about a buildup of Russian troops near Ukraine and warned him that Russia would face “severe consequences” if Moscow attacked its neighbor.</p> <p>Putin has denied plans of launching an invasion and reversed the conversation by prodding Western leaders to provide legally binding guarantees precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine and the deployment of the alliance's weapons there, calling such actions a “red line” for Moscow.</p> <p>The U.S. and its allies have refused to provide such pledges, but Biden and Putin agreed last week on further talks to discuss Russia's concerns.</p> <p>In a statement late Thursday, NATO ambassadors said they are “gravely concerned by the substantial, unprovoked, and unjustified Russian military build-up on the borders of Ukraine in recent months, and reject the false Russian claims of Ukrainian and NATO provocations.”</p> <p>But they signaled that the 30-nation alliance might be ready to discuss Russia’s security proposals.</p> <p>“We are clear that any dialogue with Russia would have to proceed on the basis of reciprocity, address NATO’s concerns about Russia’s actions, be based on the core principles and foundational documents of European security, and take place in consultation with NATO’s European partners,” they said.</p> <p>“Should Russia take concrete steps to reduce tensions, we are prepared to work on strengthening confidence-building measures,” the statement said, adding that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe could be the forum for this.</p> <p>Peskov said Russia has submitted drafts of a treaty and an agreement to the United States, but he refused to specify what specific arrangements they contained and who could be the signatories.</p> <p>He said Putin’s foreign affairs adviser, Yuri Ushakov, discussed the Russian drafts with U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan during a call Wednesday, and that Moscow was ready to start negotiations.</p> <p>Moscow’s proposals were passed on to U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried, who visited Moscow on Wednesday and met with Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov.</p> <p>Ryabkov would be ready to depart for talks on prospective agreements in a neutral country, Peskov said without giving details.</p>

Speaking last week, Ryabkov warned that the failure to stem mounting Russia-West tensions could push them to a showdown similar to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis that put the world on the verge of a nuclear war.

U.S. intelligence officials say Russia has moved 70,000 troops to its border with Ukraine and is preparing for a possible invasion early next year. Moscow has denied an intention to attack and accused Ukrainian authorities of planning an offensive to reclaim control of rebel-held eastern Ukraine — an allegation Ukraine has rejected.

Fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine began after Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. It has killed over 14,000 people and devastated Ukraine's industrial heartland called Donbas.

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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	12/16 'Tropic Trooper' reemerges 'Earth Centaur'
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/tropic-trooper-transportation/177106/
GIST	<p>They've been an active threat group since 2011, but a recent uptick in activity from Earth Centaur — previously known as Tropic Trooper — aimed specifically at transportation and government agencies is setting off alarm bells among experts.</p> <p>Trend Micro researchers have been tracking Tropic Trooper's resurgence, which began in July 2020 and has recently included troubling attempts to breach sensitive transportation-related data like flight schedules and financial planning documents.</p> <p>The analysts were able to attribute the new Earth Centaur activity to Tropic Trooper after finding similar code in configuration decoding, they reported.</p> <p>“Currently, we have not discovered substantial damage to these victims as caused by the threat group,” Trend Micro’s analysts explained. “However, we believe that it will continue collecting internal information from the compromised victims and that it is simply waiting for an opportunity to use this data.”</p> <p>Earth Centaur’s Tricks</p> <p>The group’s hallmark tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) include savvy red teamwork, the researchers noted. Earth Centaur is proficient at bypassing security and lingering undetected, the report added.</p> <p>“Depending on the target, it uses backdoors with different protocols, and it can also use the reverse proxy to bypass the monitoring of network security systems. The usage of the open-source frameworks also allows the group to develop new backdoor variants efficiently. ”</p> <p>Typically, the threat group breaches the target systems through a vulnerable Exchange or Internet Information Services (IIS) server, followed by dropping backdoors like ChiserClient and SmileSvr, the report said.</p> <p>From there, a custom version of Gh0st RAT sets out to gather data from active sessions on the host, according to the researchers. After that’s done, the attackers move through the compromised organization’s intranet and exfiltrate valuable data.</p> <p>Trend Micro said Earth Centaur used PowerShell to download Rclone, an exfiltration tool that copies data to multiple clouds.</p>

“Based on previous experience, Rclone has frequently been used in ransomware attacks to exfiltrate stolen data,” the report added. “However, it seems that currently, it is not only used in ransomware attacks but also in [advanced persistent threat, or APT] attacks.”

[Credential](#) dumping was another common tactic Trend Micro saw with the Tropic Troopers transportation campaign.

“We also observed that the group used multiple legitimate tools to dump credentials on compromised machines,” the report added. “It made good use of these tools to achieve its goal and keep its operation hidden and unobstructive.”

Tropic Trooper/Earth Centaur has also developed its own, bespoke tool for cleaning up its tracks that deletes event logs on the targeted computer.

Tropic Trooper “uses backdoors with different protocols, which are deployed depending on the victim,” Trend Micro’s researchers found. “It also has the capability to develop customized tools to evade security monitoring in different environments, and it exploits vulnerable websites and uses them as C&C servers.”

The rise of the threat actor’s interest in the transportation and government sector coincides with the November passage of the [Infrastructure Deal](#), which promises gargantuan investments across the transportation sector, including \$39 billion to modernize transit, \$89.9 billion for public transit, \$25 billion for airports, \$66 billion in rail funding and much more.

Billions in cash are about to flood the transportation sector by way of the government, and Earth Centaur appears perfectly poised to cash in.

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HEADLINE	12/17 Attacks on UK firms increase five-fold
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/attacks-on-uk-firms-increase/
GIST	<p>Attacks on UK firms surged five-fold during the pandemic and now cost way more than the global average, according to Accenture.</p> <p>The global consultancy polled 500 UK executives to compile its State of Cybersecurity Resilience 2021 study.</p> <p>It found that large organizations experienced 885 attempted cyber-attacks in 2020 – up from 156 the previous year and more than triple the global average of 270.</p> <p>They’re also more expensive than elsewhere. Accenture calculated that incidents and breaches cost over £1.3m a year – £350,000 more than the global average.</p> <p>Over 80% of respondents said the cost of staying ahead of cyber-criminals is unsustainable, a fifth more than the previous year, and a quarter said they’ve been forced to increase cybersecurity budgets by 10% or more.</p> <p>Worryingly, supply chain attacks accounted for 64% of breaches in the UK last year, up by a quarter (26%) from the previous year.</p> <p>This chimes with a recent report from BlueVoyant, which revealed 93% of global organizations suffered a direct breach due to their supply chains over the past year.</p> <p>Accenture UK security lead, Giovanni Cozzolino, argued that British firms are under siege from digital attackers.</p> <p>“It’s clear that cyber-criminals are taking full advantage of the overnight shift to home working and digital operations,” he added. “Enterprises need to be on high alert. Whether sophisticated nation-state actors or</p>

	<p>run of the mill cyber-criminals, adversaries are clearly getting more resourceful and launching attacks from every angle.”</p> <p>The report claimed that nearly half (49%) of large businesses lost over 100,000 customer records over the course of the past year, an increase of 28% from the previous year.</p> <p>“Faced with high costs in a difficult economic environment, UK firms must be smart with how they spend on security,” concluded Cozzolino.</p> <p>“Spending more without being closely aligned to the business doesn’t make your organization safer. To achieve sustained cyber resilience, CISOs need to collaborate with the right executives in their organization to understand where to prioritize.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/17 CISA: prepare for holiday cyber onslaught
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/cisa-prepare-now-for-holiday-cyber/
GIST	<p>Critical infrastructure (CNI) providers must act now to protect their IT systems from attacks during the holiday season, the US government has warned.</p> <p>The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) issued a new alert demanding a more proactive stance “in light of persistent and ongoing cyber-threats.”</p> <p>It urged organizations to ensure they have sufficient staff to monitor IT and OT systems over the holidays continuously and that they stay informed of the latest threats by signing up to CISA mailing lists and feeds.</p> <p>The agency also urged network defenders to follow industry best practices such as enforcing multi-factor authentication and strong passwords and installing software updates.</p> <p>CNI firms should also test their incident response processes and cross-sector dependencies and report any incidents and “anomalous activity” immediately to CISA, it said.</p> <p>“CISA urges critical infrastructure owners and operators to take immediate steps to strengthen their computer network defenses against potential malicious cyber-attacks. Sophisticated threat actors, including nation-states and their proxies, have demonstrated capabilities to compromise networks and develop long-term persistence mechanisms,” the agency warned.</p> <p>“These actors have also demonstrated capability to leverage this access for targeted operations against critical infrastructure with potential to disrupt National Critical Functions.”</p> <p>Threat actors often strike during holiday periods or just before, hoping to hit organizations when they are under-staffed and ill-prepared for rapid response.</p> <p>The Kaseya supply chain attack on MSPs and their downstream customers occurred over the July 4 weekend in the US. There was an attack on meat processing giant JBS USA on Memorial Day weekend, while the notorious Colonial Pipeline outage began on the Mother’s Day weekend in the US.</p> <p>Although not mentioned, the CISA alert can also be viewed in the context of the recently revealed Log4Shell vulnerability, which security teams are scrambling to patch. Its near-ubiquity complicates their efforts in vendor-produced and homegrown applications and the Java dependencies that may be hiding instances in blind spots across the enterprise.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Portland brewery, hotel chain suffers attack
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/mcmenamins-breweries-hit-by-a-conti-ransomware-attack/

Portland brewery and hotel chain McMenamins suffered a Conti ransomware attack over the weekend that disrupted the company's operations.

McMenamins is a popular chain of restaurants, pubs, breweries, and hotels located in Oregon and Washington.

The ransomware attack occurred over the weekend, on December 12th, with sources telling BleepingComputer that the Conti gang conducted it.

Servers and workstations were encrypted as part of the attack, including point-of-sale systems.

While the attack did not cause locations to close, McMenamins was forced to shut down their IT systems, credit card point-of-sale systems, and corporate email to prevent the further spread of the attack.

After BleepingComputer emailed McMenamins, they issued a statement later that night confirming that they were hit by ransomware and are working with the FBI and a third-party cybersecurity firm to investigate the attack.

"McMenamins today announced it has been the victim of a ransomware attack, which was identified and blocked on Dec. 12. At this time, it appears that no customer payment data was impacted when cybercriminals deployed malicious software that locked the company's systems and prevented access to critical information. The family-owned company has reported the incident to the FBI and is also working with a cybersecurity firm to identify the source and full scope of the attack."

It is possible that internal employee data may have been compromised, although it is not currently known whether that is the case. The following categories of employee information were potentially affected: names, addresses, email addresses, telephone numbers, dates of birth, Social Security numbers, direct deposit bank account information, and benefits records. To provide employees with peace of mind, McMenamins will be offering employees identity and credit protection services, as well as a dedicated help line through Experian. Managers will provide this information to employees directly."
- McMenamins.

As credit card scanners have been taken offline, McMenamins is being forced to change its payment processing at some locations. Unfortunately, these changes also prevent customers from purchasing or redeeming gift cards.

While our source has said that corporate data and documents appear to have been stolen during the attack, it is unknown if customer data was included. McMenamins says that their initial investigation does not indicate that any customer information was compromised as it was managed, collected, and stored by a third-party payment processing company.

However, as the hackers likely had access to the corporate network for some time, it is possible that the threat actors installed point-of-sale malware to steal credit cards, as has been done in [previous ransomware attacks](#).

Whether this has happened will not be known until the third-party cybersecurity firm completes its investigation.

Who is Conti?

[Conti ransomware](#) is a ransomware operation believed to be run by a Russian-based hacking group known for other notorious malware infections, such as TrickBot.

The ransomware gang usually gains access to a network through BazarLoader or TrickBot malware infections installed via phishing attacks or by the threat actors exploiting vulnerabilities in Internet-exposed devices, such as VPN or firewalls.

	<p>Once the attacks gain access to an internal system, they will spread through the network, steal data, and deploy their ransomware.</p> <p>Conti is considered a top-tier ransomware operation that has previously breached high-profile organizations, such as Ireland's Health Service Executive (HSE) and Department of Health (DoH), the City of Tulsa, Broward County Public Schools, FatFace, Advantech, and Sangoma.</p> <p>Due to the increased activity by the cybercrime group, the US government recently issued a warning to corporations about an increased number of Conti ransomware attacks.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Facebook disrupts spyware for hire firms
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/facebook-disrupts-operations-of-seven-surveillance-for-hire-firms/
GIST	<p>Facebook has disrupted the operations of seven different spyware-making companies, blocking their Internet infrastructure, sending cease and desist letters, and banning them from its platform.</p> <p>"As a result of our months-long investigation, we took action against seven different surveillance-for-hire entities to disrupt their ability to use their digital infrastructure to abuse social media platforms and enable surveillance of people across the internet," said Director of Threat Disruption David Agranovich and Head of Cyber Espionage Investigations Mike Dvilyanski.</p> <p>"These surveillance providers are based in China, Israel, India, and North Macedonia. They targeted people in over 100 countries around the world on behalf of their clients."</p> <p>Following this investigation, Facebook found that these seven companies' services were used against and harmed vulnerable individuals such as activists, journalists, and minorities.</p> <p>However, the surveillance companies claimed their spyware and hacking tools were only used to target and help catch criminals and terrorists.</p> <p>Facebook alerted people targeted with their surveillance tools (roughly 50,000 Facebook users) and shared its findings with other platforms, security researchers, and policymakers to take appropriate measures.</p> <p>As Citizen Labs also revealed today, some of the people targeted with such surveillance tools had their devices infected with more than one spyware strain and, in some cases, by several attackers.</p> <p>According to the full threat report also published today by Facebook, the seven surveillance-for-hire entities whose activity was disrupted as a result of Facebook's investigation and the particular stages of surveillance they're specialized in are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cobwebs Technologies (Surveillance chain phases: reconnaissance, engagement) • Cognyte (Surveillance chain phases: reconnaissance, engagement) • Black Cube (Surveillance chain phases: reconnaissance, engagement, exploitation) • Bluehawk CI (Surveillance chain phases: reconnaissance, engagement, exploitation) • BellTroX (Surveillance chain phases: reconnaissance, engagement, exploitation) • Cytrox (Surveillance chain phases: primarily exploitation) • An unknown entity in China (Surveillance chain phases: primarily reconnaissance, exploitation) <p>"Although public debate has mainly focused on the exploitation phase, it's critical to disrupt the entire lifecycle of the attack because the earlier stages enable the later ones," they added.</p> <p>"If we can collectively tackle this threat earlier in the surveillance chain, it would help stop the harm before it gets to its final, most serious stage of compromising people's devices and accounts."</p>

	<p>Facebook's investigation and disruptive actions against spyware-makers follow a string of recent reactions to the threat such entities represent to vulnerable groups.</p> <p>For instance, similar action was taken by Apple last month when it filed a lawsuit against spyware-maker NSO Group for targeting and spying on Apple users with surveillance tech.</p> <p>As later revealed, Apple warned US Department of State employees unknown attackers hacked their iPhones to deploy NSO-developed Pegasus spyware.</p> <p>In July, Citizen Lab confirmed a report published by Amnesty International and Forbidden Stories which revealed that NSO spyware was found on iPhones hacked using zero-day zero-click iMessage exploits.</p> <p>The same month, Microsoft and Citizen Lab linked spyware company Candiru to Windows spyware dubbed DevilsTongue and deployed on targets' devices using Windows zero-day vulnerabilities.</p> <p>Facebook also sued NSO Group two years ago for developing and selling a WhatsApp zero-day exploit that government-backed attackers used to compromise devices belonging to high-profile targets, including government officials, diplomats, and journalists.</p> <p>The Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) also sanctioned NSO Group and Candiru in last month for supplying software used to spy on government officials, journalists, and activists.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Phorpiex botnet variant spreads
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/attacks-breaches/phorpiex-botnet-variant-spread-across-96-countries
GIST	<p>Check Point researchers have observed a new variant of the Phorpiex botnet targeting cryptocurrency users and stealing funds through a technique called "cryptocurrency clipping."</p> <p>Phorpiex has been a known threat since 2016, primarily conducted crypto-jacking, ransomware, cryptocurrency clipping, and sextortion spam campaigns. This past summer, the botnet's command-and-control (C2) server activity dropped, according to the Check Point Research team. The C2 servers were shut down in July 2021; in August, an announcement from its owners said the Phorpiex was going out of business.</p> <p>Less than two weeks later, the C2 servers were back online under a different IP address, spreading a bot that had never been seen before. This bot, dubbed "Twizt," enables the botnet to operate without active C2 servers because it can run in peer-to-peer mode, the researchers explain. Each infected machine can act as a server and send commands to other bots in a chain.</p> <p>Check Point's telemetry revealed "an almost constant number of Phorpiex victims" that continued even when its C2 servers were inactive. The threat has been seen in 96 countries, with most victims in Ethiopia, Nigeria, and India. Numbers have started to increase in the last two months, the researchers report.</p> <p>Its methods of monetization are the same. The botnet uses cryptocurrency clipping, or crypto-clipping, a method in which attackers steal cryptocurrency during a transaction by substituting the original wallet address saved in the clipboard with their wallet address. It's common to use the clipboard to copy and paste a long cryptocurrency wallet address, they say.</p> <p>"If a malware implements the crypto-clipping functionality, it can work successfully without any C&C servers," researchers wrote in their blog post. "Therefore, when the Phorpiex C&C servers go down there is no down time because hundreds of thousands of bots remain installed and continue to steal victims' money."</p>

	They found 60 Bitcoin wallets and 37 Ethereum wallets used by the Phorpiex crypto-clipper. In the one-year period ending November 2021, Phorpiex bots hijacked 969 transactions and stole 3.64 Bitcoin, 55.87 Ether, and \$55,000 in ERC20 tokens. The value of these stolen amounts in current prices is nearly \$500,000 USD.
Return to Top	<i>Read Check Point's full writeup for more details.</i>

HEADLINE	12/16 Changes: new ransomware groups emerge
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/new-ransomware-groups-emerge/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The Ransomware as a Service (RaaS) landscape underwent another major shift in the third quarter as new variants emerged to become the dominant players in the ecosystem, according to Intel 471.</p> <p>In a new update, the threat intelligence company explained that 60% of the attacks it tracked during the period were tied back to four variants: LockBit 2.0, Conti, BlackMatter and Hive.</p> <p>Of these, LockBit 2.0 was the most prolific, accounting for a third (33%) of observed attacks, followed by Conti (15%), BlackMatter (7%) and Hive (6%).</p> <p>“Be it due to law enforcement, infighting amongst groups or people abandoning variants altogether, the RaaS groups dominating the ecosystem at this point in time are completely different than just a few months ago,” said Intel 471.</p> <p>“Yet, even with the shift in variants, ransomware incidents as a whole are still on the rise. From July to September 2021, Intel 471 observed 612 ransomware attacks that can be attributed to 35 different ransomware variants. Among those attacks, several lesser-known variants have supplanted prominent ones that rose in notoriety over the first half of 2021.”</p> <p>LockBit 2.0’s rise has been particularly notable, as it was only discovered in June 2021 following the disappearance of LockBit late last year. Its most famous scalp so far has been Accenture, which it bombarded with a DDoS attack as well as leaking data in a bid to force a \$50m ransom payment.</p> <p>Conti has been beset by in-fighting which may have led to a 64% drop in the number of recorded attacks using the variant between Q2 and Q3 2021.</p> <p>“In August, an actor leaked training documents and exposed some infrastructure that revealed two other actors’ roles in running the variant, allegedly due to the operators not paying network access brokers their cut of ransom payments,” said Intel 471.</p> <p>“The initial actor and one of the doxxed actors were booted from the forum after being tied to ransomware operations.”</p> <p>While the four mentioned variants are on the rise, Clop and REvil have fallen away after significant law enforcement disruption.</p> <p>However, the message to defenders is that the threat will persist as long as victims continue to pay up and hostile nations shelter attackers. That makes proactive threat defense a must.</p> <p>This week, news emerged that the new Log4j vulnerability is already being exploited in ransomware attacks, offering a dangerous new vector for threat actors.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Iran-linked hackers attack Israeli targets
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/iran-linked-hackers-attack-israeli-targets-company?&web_view=true
GIST	An Iran-linked hacking group attacked seven Israeli targets over a 24-hour period this week, an Israeli cybersecurity firm said, in the latest episode of cyberwarfare between the rival states.

The targets of the attack by the group called "[Charming Kitten](#)" included the Israeli "government and business sector", Tel Aviv-based Check Point said in a statement late Wednesday, without providing specifics.

"Check Point has blocked these attacks, as we witnessed communications between a server used by this group and the targets in Israel," said the firm.

"Our reports of the last 48 hours prove that both criminal hacking groups and nation state actors are engaged in the exploration of this vulnerability."

Allegations of cyberwar between Iran and Israel have escalated in recent months.

Israel has been blamed for a series of cyberattacks on Iranian infrastructure, including the country's [fuel distribution system](#) in October.

Another purportedly Iran-linked hacking group called "[Black Shadow](#)" claimed an October cyber-attack on an Israeli internet service provider.

One of the targets in that incident was Israel's largest LGBTQ dating site, with the hackers demanding ransom payments under threat of [releasing sensitive private information](#), like the HIV status of the site's users.

Israel, which bills itself as a leader in cybersecurity, last week held "an international cyber financial war game", according to the finance ministry.

Participants included the United States, Britain and the United Arab Emirates, which established diplomatic ties with Israel last year.

Other participants were Germany, Switzerland and the International Monetary Fund, the ministry said in a statement.

The drill, which Israel described as the first of its kind, was designed to simulate an international cyber-financial attack.

Chief economist at the Israeli finance ministry, Shira Greenberg, said the exercise demonstrated "the importance of coordinated global action by governments together with central banks in the face of cyber-financial threats".

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HEADLINE	12/16 Brutal: next wave of Log4j attacks
SOURCE	https://www.wired.com/story/log4j-log4shell-vulnerability-ransomware-second-wave/
GIST	<p>A WEEK AGO, the internet experienced a seismic event. Thanks to a vulnerability in Log4j, a popular open source library, multitudes of servers around the world were suddenly exposed to relatively simple attacks. The first wave of hacking is well underway. But it's what comes next that should worry you.</p> <p>So far, the vanguard of Log4j hacking has primarily comprised cryptominers, malware that leeches resources off of an affected system to mine cryptocurrency. (These were extremely popular a few years ago, before everyone realized that the real money's in ransomware.) Some nation-state spies have dabbled as well, according to recent reports from Microsoft and others. What's seemingly missing is the extortion, the ransomware, the disruptive attacks that have defined so much of the past two years or so. This won't be the case for long.</p> <p>Hype is endemic in the world of cybersecurity, as is the spread of fear, uncertainty, and doubt. Lots of software has flaws; they can't all be so bad. By all accounts, though, the Log4j vulnerability—also known</p>

as Log4Shell—lives up to the hype for a host of reasons. First is the ubiquity of Log4j itself. As a logging framework, it helps developers keep track of whatever goes on inside their apps. Because it's open source and reliable, plugging in Log4j instead of building your own logging library from scratch has become standard practice. Moreover, so much of modern software is cobbled together from various vendors and products that it may be difficult, if not impossible, for many potential victims to even know the full extent of their exposure. If your code's innermost Matryoshka doll runs Log4j, good luck finding it.

But wait, there's more! Log4Shell is also relatively trivial to exploit. Just send a malicious piece of code and wait for it to get logged. Once that happens, congratulations; you can now remotely run whatever code you want on the affected server. (Caveats: This is the short version. It's a little more complicated in practice. Also, Log4j versions prior to 2.0 appear unaffected, although there's some debate there.)

It's that combination of severity, simplicity, and pervasiveness that has the security community rattled. "It is by far the single biggest, most critical vulnerability ever," says Amit Yoran, CEO of cybersecurity firm Tenable and founding director of US-CERT, the organization responsible for coordinating public-private response to digital threats.

So far, though, that calamity seems slow to manifest. Hackers are absolutely targeting Log4j; security firm Check Point has seen over 1.8 million attempts to exploit the vulnerability since Friday, according to spokesperson Ekram Ahmed. At some points, they've seen over 100 attempts per minute. And state-sponsored groups from China and Iran have been spotted using Log4Shell to establish footholds in various targets. Still, for now, cryptominers reign.

"Miners are usually the first to jump on these things because they're the lowest-risk form of cybercrime," says Sean Gallagher, senior threat researcher at cybersecurity company Sophos. "They don't require a whole lot of hacking beyond getting in, they don't require a whole lot of hands-on keyboard skills to deploy. They're generally packaged and ready to go; all they need is a vulnerability to get in with."

Placing cryptominers can also be a largely automated process; just set up a command-and-control server to scan for vulnerable systems, and drop the malware in when you find it. They also require bulk infections to generate enough cryptocurrency to make the endeavor worth it, which is why they take such an indiscriminate approach. And that's what you've seen in phase one of the Log4Shell fallout.

Phase two is almost certainly underway. That's when the so-called access brokers get to work, selling their Log4j footholds to cybercriminals in search of easy entry. Ransomware gangs and other crooks, meanwhile, are either customers in that market or hard at work developing their own exploits. More sophisticated actors are taking measure of what systems they're in, what defenses they encounter, and what's worth pursuing further. Log4j gets you into a system, but you still need a strategy for once you're there.

"Weaponizing this vulnerability, or any vulnerability, for ransomware or espionage takes more planning," says Nicholas Luedtke, principal analyst at security firm Mandiant. "You have to figure out where you landed, what permissions you have, and then begin to conduct your post-exploitation activities. That may require escalating privileges, establishing command-and-control, etc."

While much of this foundational work has likely already been undertaken, it might be a while before its impacts are fully known. Early indications are worrisome, though. "We're also already seeing it leveraged for ransomware attacks, which, again, should be a major alarm bell," says Yoran. "We've also seen reports of attackers using Log4Shell to destroy systems without even looking to collect ransom, a fairly unusual behavior."

Still other threat actors, particularly those focused on espionage, may be biding their time so as not to give away their position. Log4j provides a footbridge over the moat; once you've crossed it, you don't care if someone burns it down behind you. In fact, that might be preferable. An organization that thinks its Log4Shell problem is solved may let down its guard.

	<p>“Honestly, the biggest threat here is that people have already gotten access and are just sitting on it, and even if you remediate the problem somebody’s already in the network,” says Gallagher.</p> <p>Big organizations, the Fortune 500 types, likely have the resources to plug their Log4Shell holes in the coming weeks and months. But even they’ll have to wait for third-party vendors to provide fixes. And whole constellations of companies and organizations lack the capacity or personnel even to know how exposed they are, much less patch those points of exposure. To say nothing of the vast swaths of the internet that no one’s looking after at all. The next wave of Log4Shell is coming. And then the next, and the next, and the next, and the next.</p> <p>“It’s going to be around,” says Gallagher, “as long as the internet.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Harvard job scam targeted women in India
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/16/technology/harvard-job-scam-india.html
GIST	<p>NEW DELHI — Nidhi Razdan was all set to travel to Harvard University to start a new job, and a new life, when she received a stunning email.</p> <p>A famous Indian news anchor at the apex of her career, Ms. Razdan believed she would soon start teaching at Harvard, a dream ticket out of an almost unbearably toxic media atmosphere in India.</p> <p>She had told the world that she was leaving the news business for America and she had freely shared her most important personal information with her new employer — passport details, medical records, bank account numbers, everything.</p> <p>But when she swiped open her phone in the middle of a January night, she read the following message, from an associate dean at Harvard:</p> <p>“There is no record of, nor any knowledge of, your name or your appointment.”</p> <p>The email closed: “I wish you the best for your future.”</p> <p>Ms. Razdan felt dizzy and nauseated. She had thrown away a high-flying career in journalism and fallen into an intricate online hoax.</p> <p>“I just couldn’t believe it,” Ms. Razdan said.</p> <p>The hoax that ensnared Ms. Razdan exploited Harvard’s prestige, the confusion caused by the pandemic, and her own digital naïveté. At the time she went public, what had happened to her seemed like a shocking but isolated incident. But it wasn’t. Ms. Razdan was one of several prominent female journalists and media personalities in India who were targeted, even after one of the women alerted Harvard and the public about the unusual cyberoperation.</p> <p>The incidents raised questions about why Harvard — despite its reputation for fiercely protecting its brand — did not act to stop the scam, even after being explicitly warned about it. They also revealed how easy it is for wrongdoers to hide their identities on the internet, a risk that is likely to get worse as the technology used in digital fakery continues to improve.</p> <p>The people — or person — behind the hoax were relentless. They created a constellation of interlocking personas across Twitter, Facebook, Gmail and WhatsApp to pursue the women for months at a time. Unlike typical online fraudsters, they did not appear to use the personal information they extracted to steal money or to extort the women, leaving their ultimate goal a mystery.</p> <p>Nearly a year later, it is still uncertain why Ms. Razdan and the other women were targeted. Although the scammers expressed support online for the Hindu nationalist movement in India, they shed little light on their decision to trick reporters.</p>

The perpetrators have successfully covered their tracks — at least, most of them. The New York Times reviewed private messages, emails and metadata the scammers sent to the women as well as archives of the scammers' tweets and photos that the scammers claimed were of themselves. The Times also relied on analysis from researchers at Stanford University and the University of Toronto who study online abuse, and from a cybersecurity expert who examined Ms. Razdan's computer.

The identities of the scammers remain a secret.

"It's not like anything I've ever seen," said Bill Marczak, a senior research fellow at Citizen Lab, an institute at the University of Toronto that investigates cyberattacks on journalists. "It's a huge amount of effort and no payoff that we've identified."

'This hotel fine for you?'

One at a time, the scammers selected their prey.

The first known target: [Rohini Singh](#), an outspoken female journalist who had broken some big stories that powerful men in India didn't like.

Ms. Singh delivered a blockbuster article in 2017 about [the business fortunes of the son of India's current minister of home affairs](#). She is a freelance contributor to an online publication called [The Wire](#) that is among the most critical of the Hindu nationalist government in India. She has also amassed [nearly 796,000 Twitter followers](#).

In mid-August 2019, Ms. Singh received a Twitter message from someone calling himself Tauseef Ahmad, who said he was a master's student at the Harvard Kennedy School and from Ms. Singh's hometown, Lucknow. They chitchatted about Lucknow and then he invited her to participate in a high-powered media conference. Harvard would pick up all expenses.

She was intrigued. But she grew suspicious after Tauseef connected her to a colleague, introduced as Alex Hirschman, who wrote to her on Aug. 19 from a Gmail account rather than an official Harvard.edu email address. On top of that, both Tauseef and Alex had telephone numbers that were not based in the United States.

Alex and Tauseef then asked her for passport details and some photos, which were to be used for promotional purposes.

A few days later, convinced their entreaty was a scam, Ms. Singh ceased communication.

The next target was another female journalist, [Zainab Sikander](#). An up-and-coming political commentator, Ms. Sikander campaigns against discrimination toward Muslims, a growing problem under the Hindu nationalist government. She has also written and posted many [critical observations of](#) the administration of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

On Aug. 22, 2019, Ms. Sikander, too, received a Twitter message from Tauseef Ahmad, inviting her to participate in a high-powered media conference at Harvard. It was the same message sent to Ms. Singh, though neither woman knew the other had been targeted.

Flattered and curious, Ms. Sikander began chatting with Tauseef on the WhatsApp instant messaging and calling app. She wasn't thrown off by the fact that his phone number started with the country code of the United Arab Emirates, although he claimed to be in the Boston area. Maybe he was a foreign student with Dubai connections, she thought. She remembers his voice: young, with a South Asian accent, which she believed sounded Pakistani.

Just like in Ms. Singh's case, Tauseef connected her to Alex Hirschman. What she didn't know was that Alex and Tauseef were likely fake personas — a search of Harvard's student directory showed no students by either name.

Ms. Sikander also didn't know that Tauseef's Twitter account was one of several online personas that were interlinked. Tauseef and Alex seemed so friendly, sending her compliments — and confirmations for the flights and hotels they claimed to have booked.

"This room and this hotel fine for you?" one of their messages said.

Still, something told her to beware. When she asked for a formal invite from a dean, it never came. Ms. Sikander then broke off contact as well.

At the time, India was dominated by a seismic news event: Kashmir. The Indian government had suddenly wiped away the autonomy of the Kashmir region, a restive, Muslim-majority territory that has been the source of a never-ending feud between India and Pakistan.

The Indian government was extremely sensitive about criticism of its move. It severed internet service to Kashmir and pre-emptively cracked down on critics and potential critics, [throwing more than 2,000 Kashmiris in jail](#), including the region's top politicians.

Ms. Sikander had written [critical pieces and posts about the government's action in Kashmir](#). Some analysts believe the scammers may have gone after her because of her trenchant views.

The next target was another female journalist working at a prominent Indian publication, who spoke with The Times on the condition that she was not identified. Suspicious about the scammer's U.A.E. phone number, she quickly broke off contact too. But the scammers didn't give up. By the time they communicated in November 2019 with Nighat Abbass, a spokeswoman for India's ruling political party, known by its acronym, the B.J.P., they had copied email signatures from real Harvard employees and swiped official letterhead from the university's website.

Around the same time, they opened a new Twitter account under the name Seema Singh, who identified herself as a "coder" and claimed she was based in Bharat, another name for India that is preferred by nationalists who see "India" as a colonial term. She sent sexually aggressive messages, tagging Ms. Sikander and some of the other women targeted in the scam.

"You look so hot," she said in one tweet. "Can I join you in your shower?" said another.

Seema Singh later updated her profile, claiming to be a bisexual Deutsche Bank employee living in Frankfurt. (A Deutsche Bank spokesman said the bank had no employees by that name.) She seemed intimately familiar with Indian politics, constantly commenting on the often raw divide between India's majority Hindus and minority Muslims and calling out personal connections that the women targeted in the scam had with Kashmir.

Ms. Abbass didn't notice the raunchy tweets from Seema's account. Excited about making her first trip to America, she focused on exchanging emails and messages with Tauseef.

It was only after the scammers pushed for passport details and other personal information that Ms. Abbass decided she should check directly with one of the Harvard administrators included on the emails.

That administrator, Bailey Payne, a program coordinator in the office of Harvard's vice provost for international affairs, responded, saying the official invitation that appeared to have been sent from her Harvard.edu email address was fake. When Ms. Payne asked Ms. Abbass if she would like to share more information, Ms. Abbass eagerly cooperated. She sent in a trove — the phone number from the U.A.E., the emails, screenshots of the fake Harvard documents and hotel booking records.

But it's not clear what action, if any, Harvard took. Ms. Payne did not respond to requests for comment. Jason Newton, a Harvard spokesman, declined to comment on what the university did with the information Ms. Abbass provided.

By the time the hacker or hackers reached out to Ms. Razdan that same month, in late November 2019, they were well practiced.

But they were also attracting attention. That same month, Ms. Abbass [tweeted a passionate video warning others to watch out for Tauseef and the scam](#). And in December 2019, Twitter users in India accused Seema of faking her online persona. She responded by claiming to be a civil servant with the Indian Police Service and threatened to file complaints against her accusers.

Despite the accusations, the account under that name regularly posted photos it claimed were of her. It is unclear whether the photos actually depicted her or were stolen — reverse image searches for them turned up no results.

'Our No. 1'

Ms. Razdan, now 44, was one of the most prominent female Indian journalists of her generation.

Over a career spanning more than 20 years, she had covered India's biggest stories as the country transformed itself into an economic powerhouse. She was polite but fearless, [the anchor of the 9 o'clock news program on NDTV](#), one of India's most prominent independent news channels, a familiar face across a nation of 1.4 billion people.

"She was our No. 1," said her former boss, Prannoy Roy, NDTV's founder.

But by 2019, she was fried.

"It was a mad year," Ms. Razdan said, citing the string of huge stories that broke, from [a conflict between India and Pakistan](#) and [national elections](#) to [the profound reorganization of Kashmir](#). "I was mentally and physically exhausted."

She was also mercilessly trolled by India's right wing, like many independent journalists are, and said to herself: "If I don't try something new now, I never will."

It was as if the scammers read her mind.

The first email arrived Nov. 14, 2019, from an earnest sounding student — Melissa Reeve — inviting her to a Harvard media seminar. She was then introduced, by email, to another student, Tauseef Ahmad. When he said there might be a journalism job available at Harvard, Ms. Razdan let her hopes soar.

"I thought it would be the opening to a new world," she said.

The next thing Ms. Razdan knew, she was interviewing with someone claiming to be Bharat Anand, the name of a real vice provost at Harvard. She never saw him, though. The interview was by phone.

"This is where I feel I really messed up," she said. "I should have insisted it be a video call."

The scammers were taking bolder steps to impersonate Harvard. They bought a website from GoDaddy, HarvardCareer.com, in January 2020 and set up a Microsoft email server that would soon allow them to send messages stamped with Harvard's name. Unlike earlier owners of the domain, they opted for privacy protection that obscured their names from public registries of website owners.

She was then asked for references. Each of the people Ms. Razdan enlisted received an official looking email from HarvardCareer.com with a web link to upload a recommendation.

“There was a lovely Harvard shield,” Mr. Roy remembered. “I didn’t have the slightest doubt.”

Harvard says it fiercely protects its trademark, employing software to detect new websites that infringe on its brand, but Mr. Newton, the university spokesman, declined to say if it had detected HarvardCareer.com. The scammers continued to use it to send emails, capitalizing on Harvard’s reputation. They also copied employment documents from Harvard’s official website, using them as fodder as the scam advanced.

In February 2020, right before Covid-19 exploded across the world, Ms. Razdan was told the job was hers. It paid \$151,000 a year, far more than she was making at NDTV. She received a lengthy contract that included everything from arbitration clauses to details about dental insurance. She was even sent information about how her new Harvard faculty ID would get her discounts at Boston-area museums. She could barely contain her excitement. In June 2020, [she announced to the world, via Twitter](#): “I am changing direction and moving on. Later this year, I start as an Associate Professor teaching journalism as part of Harvard University’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences.”

Congratulations poured in, from some of India’s biggest names, spreading the news even farther. [Shashi Tharoor](#), an erudite opposition politician with millions of Twitter followers, lamented, “Will miss you, [@Nidhi](#).”

No one at Harvard — which has many students and professors from India or who follow India closely — seemed to put two and two together: that Nidhi Razdan, the famous journalist, was announcing that she had a job at Harvard when there was no such job.

‘My pride’

Online classes were supposed to start in September. Ms. Razdan was sent a sheaf of forms, all on Harvard letterhead, for her visa application, salary payments and medical insurance. The documents were stolen from Harvard’s website, where the university made them publicly available.

Right before classes were to begin, she received an email saying there was a delay because of Covid-19. The scammers would use the pandemic many times as an excuse for delays or slip-ups.

They also asked her to install Team Viewer, which is software that enables computers to connect to each other. Team Viewer would allow the scammers to access files on her laptop, but Ms. Razdan didn’t know that. Trying to be helpful, she downloaded the software.

The scammers played off Ms. Razdan’s eagerness to connect with faculty members. Several times they invited her to do a video call with Emma Densch, a real dean at Harvard.

But the calls kept getting canceled at the last minute, each with a more fantastic excuse. Once she was told that the dean had to rush out to deal with a faculty suicide.

By December, Ms. Razdan began to get annoyed at what she thought was flakiness. She was also a bit peeved that she hadn’t been paid yet. She reached out to officials in Harvard’s human resources department. They didn’t write back. She then emailed Ms. Densch’s office directly, asking about the canceled video calls.

Ms. Densch’s assistant wrote back that Ms. Razdan was never on the dean’s schedule.

The assistant then asked: Who were you talking to?

Ms. Razdan sent in a flurry of correspondence, including her signed contract.

By this point, she said, she knew something was wrong but she still had no idea she was being fooled. “I just thought these were bureaucratic snags,” she said. “Or delays because of the pandemic.”

That's when she received the shocking email in the middle of the night. She never went back to sleep.

She turned to Jiten Jain, the director of [a cybersecurity firm in India called Voyager Infosec](#), to perform a forensic analysis of her laptop and devices. Mr. Jain, who shared his findings with The New York Times, said Ms. Razdan's email account had likely been hacked. Worse, Mr. Jain found remnants of a suspicious installer file on her computer, a sign that malware may have been installed.

Ms. Razdan went public, saying on Twitter and in [a confessional article on NDTV's website](#) that she had been scammed. Her disclosure ignited speculation about who could have been behind the attack. Other victims of the scam believed that they might have been targeted by a foreign government, or even their own.

"No other government would invest so much to embarrass Indian journalists," said Ms. Singh, the first reporter the scammers tried to ensnare. "This government does it." Ms. Singh pointed to her previous experience being targeted by [malware widely believed to have been purchased by the Indian government](#) as evidence of its willingness to tamper with the press. Government officials, including the Ministry of Home Affairs, did not respond to requests to comment.

Mr. Jain believed foreign governments might have played a role. The suspicious file he uncovered on Ms. Razdan's computer contained an IP address that had once been linked to a hacking group believed to be associated with Pakistani intelligence.

Mr. Jain also discovered several other suspicious websites that purported to be career pages for other Ivy League universities, but were registered in China, making him believe the scam that targeted Ms. Razdan was part of a broader operation.

"After looking at all the evidence and technical analysis of the devices," Mr. Jain said, "it appears to be a group of sophisticated actors running a targeted surveillance campaign."

But the tech companies whose platforms were exploited said government agencies had not played a role.

In January, Twitter suspended Tauseef and Seema's accounts, as well as four others that the company said were connected to them. The company said it could not publicly identify the other accounts because it does not share user data unless it can determine that the users were participating in a state-backed campaign.

"We permanently suspended six accounts as fake based on our [platform manipulation and spam policy](#). There were no signs of the accounts being state-backed," a spokeswoman said.

A Facebook spokeswoman said accounts set up by the scammers had been suspended. Facebook, too, found no evidence that this was a state-sponsored campaign. A Microsoft spokesman said that the email server used by the scammers had been purchased through GoDaddy, and that it, therefore, did not have payment details that could identify the person running the email server. GoDaddy also declined to identify the customer.

"We take customer privacy very seriously and don't discuss customers' account details unless provided with a court order," said Dan Race, a GoDaddy spokesman.

Another theory emerged: Perhaps the women were targeted by an individual, someone ideologically aligned with the Hindu nationalist ruling party in India and willing to go to great lengths to humiliate critics of the government's intervention in Kashmir and those who spoke out against the divide between Hindus and Muslims. On Twitter, the scammers' Seema account, which was like an alter ego to the more mild Tauseef account, frequently ranted about these issues.

Miles McCain, a researcher at the Stanford Internet Observatory, a policy center focused on abuses of the internet, analyzed the messages and discovered that Alex and Tauseef's Gmail addresses were connected

to a Samsung Galaxy S8 phone. That small detail could puncture theories that the women were targeted by a group of people, Mr. McCain noted — it might be a sign that a single individual was operating both accounts from the cellphone.

A Google spokeswoman declined to comment on the specific Gmail accounts. “When we detect that a user is the target of a government-backed attack,” she said, “we send them a prominent [warning](#) alerting them that they are at risk.”

An analysis of the scammers’ emails conducted by Citizen Lab revealed that the messages were sent from internet addresses in the U.A.E., not Boston — a clue that seemed to fit with the U.A.E. phone number that Tauseef used.

But the IP addresses and Mr. Jain’s findings raised more questions. Were the scammers operating from the U.A.E., Pakistan, China, or from within India? Strangely, the emails did not contain so-called phishing links — a clue that might have revealed more about how the reporters’ information was obtained and who was behind the intrusions

After learning she had been tricked, Ms. Razdan retreated from public view. She lost weight. She avoided friends. She turned to the Indian police, who have begun their own investigation but have not made any findings public.

Just like Ms. Abbass, she urged Harvard to investigate, emailing the university that “Someone/group of people have been impersonating senior Harvard officials and forging their signatures, and must be brought to book.”

She said Harvard never wrote back.

In the past few months, Ms. Razdan has quietly begun to rebuild her life. She found a job teaching public policy at an Indian university and writes a [weekly column for Gulf News](#), a big paper in the Middle East. Still, she spends a lot of time by herself, rotating through feelings of anger, regret and shame.

And she keeps asking herself the same question: “How could I be so stupid?”

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HEADLINE	12/16 Hive ransomware more active, aggressive
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/hive-ransomware-enters-big-league-with-hundreds-breached-in-four-months/
GIST	<p>The Hive ransomware gang is more active and aggressive than its leak site shows, with affiliates attacking an average of three companies every day since the operation became known in late June.</p> <p>Security researchers gleaning information straight from Hive’s administrator panel found that affiliates had breached more than 350 organizations over four months.</p> <p>The gang’s data leak site currently lists only 55 companies that did not pay the ransom, suggesting that a large number of Hive ransomware victims paid the ransom.</p> <p>A conservative estimation places Hive ransomware gang’s profits into millions of U.S. Dollars between October and November alone.</p> <p>Recruiting partners</p> <p>Hive ransomware emerged in late June targeting companies in various sectors. While most of the non-paying victims on their leak site are small to medium-sized businesses, the gang also published files from larger companies with revenues assessed to be in the hundreds of millions.</p>

A source has told BleepingComputer that Hive ransomware is also behind the recent attack on Virginia's Division of Legislative Automated Systems (DLAS). However, we could not independently verify the information.

Analysts at cybersecurity company Group-IB investigating the Hive ransomware-as-a-service (RaaS) operation discovered that the group is "one of the most aggressive ones," its affiliates hitting at least 355 companies by October 16.

The first publicly known attack from this gang was on June 23, against Canadian IT company Altus Group. At that time, it was unclear if Hive was a RaaS operation open to other cybercriminals.

Things became clear in early September when the group, through a user known as "kkk," replied in a thread on "reputable" ransomware programs that they were looking for partners that already had access to company networks.

The message also included details about splitting the ransom money: 80% for affiliates, 20% for the developers.

The same user also provided technical information about the file-encrypting malware in a self-destructing note captured by Group-IB researchers.

Although "kkk" did not name the RaaS they were representing, the researchers say that the technical details provided made it clear that the actor was referring to Hive ransomware.

Behind the Hive ransomware curtains

Group-IB obtained access to the Hive ransomware admin panel and started to collect information about the operation and how it worked.

It appears that the developers set everything up to make ransomware deployment and negotiations with the victims as easy and transparent as possible.

Affiliates can generate a malware version in up to 15 minutes and negotiations run via Hive ransomware admins, who pass the message to the victim in a chat window also visible to affiliates.

Although the decryption software is provided after paying the ransom, some companies complained that the tool was not working properly and corrupted the Master Boot Record of virtual machines, making them non-bootable.

In a report shared with BleepingComputer, Group-IB notes that the Hive ransomware administration panel shows affiliates how much money they made, the companies that paid and those that had their data leaked, and lets them store profiles for targeted businesses.

The researchers found that all affiliates have access to the company IDs in the Hive ransomware database, which is rather unusual.

Furthermore, the admin panels and the leak site are running through an API (Application Programming Interface), which Group-IB says has been seen with only two other ransomware groups: Grief and DoppelPaymer.

Looking closer at the API, the researchers found an error that allowed them to glean information about all Hive ransomware attacks, which also let them gauge how many companies paid these attackers. According to their assessment, the threat actor hit 355 organizations by October 16; 104 victims negotiated with the attackers.

"Based on the analysis of company data obtained through API, the number of victims grew by 72% in less than one month. On September 16, the total number of records related to victim companies was 181. Just

one month later, on October 16, the number increased to 312. Notably, 43 companies listed as victims in September disappeared from API in October, most likely after paying the ransom” - Group-IB

As for the money extorted from victims, Group-IB told BleepingComputer that they estimate the gang made at least \$6.5 million from October to November.

Group-IB’s research into the ransomware business, recently published in the company’s recent report called “[Corporansom: threat number one](#),” shows that about 30% of the victims choose to pay the threat actor.

Despite being more active than initially believed, Hive ransomware relies on common initial compromise methods, which include the following:

- vulnerable RDP servers
- compromised VPN credentials
- phishing emails with malicious attachments

The attackers also deploy the encryption stage of the attack during non-working hours or over the weekend, which is typical for most ransomware attacks.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Russia cracking down on cyberattacks?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/12/16/it-unclear-whether-russia-is-cracking-down-cyber-attacks/
GIST	<p>Six months ago today, President Biden warned Russian President Vladimir Putin in a face-to-face meeting that he must rein in criminal ransomware hackers operating on Russian territory or face consequences.</p> <p>Since then, there's been no reduction in the overall pace of ransomware attacks from Russia, government officials have said.</p> <p>Biden was stern but clear-eyed about the challenge of compelling the United States’ former Cold War foe to call a halt to the attacks that have threatened U.S. gas and meat supplies and stoked fear among the general public.</p> <p>“We’ll find out within the next six months to a year whether or not we actually have a strategic dialogue that matters,” he said.</p> <p>But has Russian behavior changed at all?</p> <p>Maybe.</p> <p>The good news: There’s been a lull since July in the sort of economy-rattling ransomware attacks that prompted the Biden-Putin standoff, such as the May attack against Colonial Pipeline that threatened U.S. gas supplies and prompted panic buying at gas stations.</p> <p>“My guess is the Kremlin gave the message to criminals to stay off the front pages. They’re going to frown on things that get a lot of public attention,” Jim Lewis, a former government cyber official who leads the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank’s Strategic Technologies Program, told me.</p> <p>That’s created some breathing room as the administration talks with Russia about decreasing ransomware attacks and tries to wrangle an agreement among 30 countries to combat the cyberattacks that lock victims’ computers and demand payments to unlock them.</p> <p>Russian criminal ransomware gangs are generally believed to operate with at least the tacit consent of the Kremlin even though their hacks are aimed at financial gain rather than serving Russian geopolitical interests.</p>

Intentional or coincidental?

However, it's not clear if the lull in high-profile attacks is a result of Kremlin action or merely a coincidence. And even if the Kremlin did order a pullback, there's no guarantee it will continue.

In the absence of guarantees from Russia, the administration has worked to harden U.S. ransomware defenses.

But the effort has been stymied by the government's limited authority to require companies to meet basic cyber standards. And regulation-wary Congress seems unlikely to broaden the government's authority.

"President Biden and this administration have made ransomware a national security priority for the first time, and we are bringing to bear the full power of the federal government to take on this years-long global problem," a senior administration official told me.

The official, who asked not to be named as ground rules for the conversation, stressed that Biden "believes it's good for leaders to communicate with each other face to face as he has done with President Putin, [China President Xi Jinping], and others," but that the administration has also undertaken "a whole-of-government effort to disrupt ransomware infrastructure and actors."

A case in point: The Justice Department clawed back more than \$8 million in ransomware payments from hackers' cryptocurrency accounts.

But that's small potatoes compared with the immense profitability of ransomware, which experts estimate earns hackers more than \$400 million per year.

Jon Bateman, a former Defense Intelligence Agency analyst, compared it to efforts to stop the highly profitable international trade in illegal drugs.

"If we haven't won the war on drugs, I'm not sure we can expect to win the war on ransomware. There's too much money at play," Bateman, who's now a cybersecurity fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told me.

Behind the scenes

It's possible the Biden administration has launched covert cyber operations that have convinced the Kremlin to force a change in behavior among Russian ransomware hackers.

Biden telegraphed that possibility during his June meeting with Putin, warning that the United States has "significant cyber capabilities" if it chooses to retaliate in that domain.

Yet, U.S. retaliation in cyberspace has tended to be restrained — such as [shutting off Internet](#) at a major Russian troll farm before the 2018 election.

That's partly because U.S. officials are wary of purposely or accidentally causing significant damage and falling afoul of the rules of good behavior in cyberspace that they've tried to convince other nations to follow.

There's also serious concern that the United States would come out behind in any tit-for-tat cyber exchange with Russia because U.S. companies and citizens are more reliant on the Internet for daily activities and thus more vulnerable.

The growing threat of Russia invading Ukraine presents another complication.

With up to 90,000 Russian troops staged along the Ukraine border, the administration's attention has shifted to the threat of a tanks-and-guns war on European soil and ransomware concerns are no longer dominating the conversation.

	<p>That reflects a common plight for cybersecurity issues, which are frequently forced to take a back seat to larger geopolitical concerns, especially involving Russia and China.</p> <p>In this case, officials may be wary of getting too tough on cyber issues with Russia, preferring to keep their diplomatic powder dry to ward off a Ukraine invasion. Putin may also want to keep his cyber options open during such a tense moment.</p> <p>“This is the last time Putin would be telling his cyber goons to call off the attack dogs,” Bateman said, “because they might be quite useful in reminding America that Russia continues to have ways to harm its interests.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Companies scramble: paychecks on Friday?
SOURCE	https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/security/ransomware-attack-threatens-paychecks-just-christmas-rcna8795
GIST	<p>A major payroll company has been crippled by ransomware hackers, leaving some companies around the country scrambling to cover employees’ last paychecks before Christmas and many workers wondering if they’ll get paid on time.</p> <p>Kronos, one of the largest workforce management companies in the U.S., was hit with ransomware Saturday, according to the company's public updates page, and announced Monday that its programs that rely on cloud services — which a number of companies use to pay employees and manage their hours — would be unavailable for “several weeks.”</p> <p>For many Americans who are paid biweekly, Dec. 17 is the final payday before Christmas.</p> <p>A spokesperson for Kronos declined to name which ransomware group was responsible, whether the company planned to pay, how much the hackers demanded or to provide a full list of customers that use its cloud services and were affected.</p> <p>A number of major companies, including Whole Foods, GameStop and Honda, as well as state and local government agencies like the state of West Virginia and city of Cleveland, rely on Kronos for payroll and scheduling services for their employees.</p> <p>“There is a real fear about our paychecks this upcoming Friday,” said one Whole Foods employee, who requested not to be named out of fear of reprisal.</p> <p>“Whole Foods has instructed us to use a paper punch sheet to keep track of our hours & our Team Leads have been instructed to hand write the schedule, since the schedule writing system is also down,” she said in an email.</p> <p>Rachel Malish, a spokesperson for Whole Foods, said that the company sent a memo to employees Wednesday that it had found a way to pay all employees on Friday.</p> <p>GameStop didn’t respond to requests for comment.</p> <p>A number of healthcare companies and hospitals rely on Kronos for scheduling and payroll, John Riggi, the senior advisor for cybersecurity at the American Hospital Association, an industry group, said in a press statement.</p> <p>“A lack of the availability of those services could be quite disruptive for health care providers, many of whom are experiencing surges of COVID-19 and flu patients. We have received several reports from the field indicating that some hospitals and health systems have been impacted by this ransomware attack,” Riggi said.</p> <p>“Like many companies, Honda’s timekeeping system has been impacted by the outage,” Marcos Frommer, a spokesperson for Honda North America, said in an email. “The outage has resulted in a temporary</p>

	<p>disruption to our payroll reporting system. Honda is taking steps to minimize the impact to our associates. We're continuing to work closely with UKG to resolve this issue."</p> <p>The state of West Virginia, which uses Kronos for most employee agencies, is relying on emergency funding to pay staffers on time, state auditor JB McCuskey said in a news release.</p> <p>Ransomware, where hackers remotely lock computers and demand a payment to fix them or to not reveal their contents to the public, has become a booming criminal industry. The Biden administration has taken several steps to bolster the country's cybersecurity efforts, and the Department of Defense recently admitted to occasionally knocking some international ransomware actors offline.</p> <p>But the underground hacking world is resilient and persists despite those measures, said Brett Callow, an analyst at the cybersecurity company Emsisoft.</p> <p>"Ransomware nonetheless remains a very big problem, and unfortunately, it's a problem that's not likely to be solved anytime soon," Callow said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Mass-scale spyware attack campaign
SOURCE	https://securelist.com/pseudomanscript-a-mass-scale-spyware-attack-campaign/105286/
GIST	<p>In June 2021, Kaspersky ICS CERT experts identified malware whose loader has some similarities to the Manuscript malware, which is part of the Lazarus APT group's arsenal. In 2020, the group used Manuscript in attacks on defense enterprises in different countries. These attacks are described in the report "Lazarus targets defense industry with ThreatNeedle".</p> <p>Curiously, the data exfiltration channel of the malware uses an implementation of the KCP protocol that has previously been seen in the wild only as part of the APT41 group's toolset. We dubbed the newly-identified malware PseudoManuscript.</p> <p>The PseudoManuscript loader makes its way onto user systems via a MaaS platform that distributes malware in pirated software installer archives. One specific case of the PseudoManuscript downloader's distribution is its installation via the Glupteba botnet (whose main installer is also distributed via the pirated software installer distribution platform). This means that the malware distribution tactics used by the threat actor behind PseudoManuscript demonstrate no particular targeting.</p> <p>During the period from January 20 to November 10, 2021, Kaspersky products blocked PseudoManuscript on more than 35,000 computers in 195 countries of the world. Such a large number of attacked systems is not characteristic of the Lazarus group or APT attacks as a whole.</p> <p>Targets of PseudoManuscript attacks include a significant number of industrial and government organizations, including enterprises in the military-industrial complex and research laboratories.</p> <p>According to our telemetry, at least 7.2% of all computers attacked by the PseudoManuscript malware are part of industrial control systems (ICS) used by organizations in various industries, including Engineering, Building Automation, Energy, Manufacturing, Construction, Utilities, and Water Management.</p> <p>The main PseudoManuscript module has extensive and varied spying functionality. It includes stealing VPN connection data, logging keypresses, capturing screenshots and videos of the screen, recording sound with the microphone, stealing clipboard data and operating system event log data (which also makes stealing RDP authentication data possible), and much more. Essentially, the functionality of PseudoManuscript provides the attackers with virtually full control of the infected system.</p>
Return to Top	<i>More information on PseudoManuscript is available on the Kaspersky ICS CERT website.</i>

HEADLINE	12/16 Depth, diversity of hacker-for-hire industry
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SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/spyware-find-highlights-depth-hacker-hire-industry-81798858
GIST	<p>BOSTON -- Security researchers said Thursday they found two kinds of commercial spyware on the phone of a leading exiled Egyptian dissident, providing new evidence of the depth and diversity of the abusive hacker-for-hire industry.</p> <p>One piece of malware recently found on an iPhone belonging to Ayman Nour, a dissident and 2005 Egyptian presidential candidate who subsequently spent three years in jail, originated with the increasingly embattled NSO Group of Israel. That company was recently blacklisted by Washington. The other was from a company called Cytrox, which also has Israeli ties. This was the first documentation of a hack by Cytrox, a little-known NSO Group rival.</p> <p>The spyware was uncovered by digital sleuths at the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab, who said two different governments hired the competing mercenaries to hack Nour's phone. Both instances of malware were simultaneously active on the phone, investigators said after examining its logs. The researchers said they traced the Cytrox hack to Egypt but didn't know who was behind the NSO Group infection.</p> <p>The researchers said in a report that the intrusions highlight how “hacking civil society transcends any specific mercenary spyware company.”</p> <p>In detailing the Cytrox infection, the researchers said they found the phone of a second Egyptian exile, who asked not to be identified, also hacked with Cytrox's Predator malware. But the bigger discovery, in a joint probe with Facebook, was that Cytrox has customers in countries beyond Egypt including Armenia, Greece, Indonesia, Madagascar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Serbia.</p> <p>Facebook's owner, Meta, announced on Thursday a flurry of takedowns of accounts affiliated with seven surveillance-for-hire firms — including Cytrox — and notified about 50,000 people in more than 100 countries including journalists, dissidents and clergy who may have been targeted by them. It said it deleted about 300 Facebook and Instagram accounts linked to Cytrox, which appears to operate out of North Macedonia.</p> <p>Cytrox's last known CEO, Ivo Malinkovski, could not be located for comment. He scrubbed his LinkedIn page earlier this month to remove mention of his Cytrox affiliation -- though a coffee mug with the company name was in his profile photo. The business intelligence website Crunchbase says Cytrox was founded in a Tel Aviv suburb in 2017.</p> <p>Citizen Lab researcher Bill Marzak said investigators found the malware on Nour's iPhone after it was “running hot” in June. He said the Cytrox malware appears to pull the same tricks as NSO Group's Pegasus product — in particular, turning a smartphone into an eavesdropping device and siphoning out its vital data. One captured module records all sides of a live conversation, he said.</p> <p>Nour said in an interview from Turkey that he was not surprised by the discovery, as he's sure he has been under Egyptian surveillance for years. Nour said he suspected Egyptian military intelligence in the Cytrox hack. An Egyptian foreign ministry spokesman did not respond to calls and texts requesting comment.</p> <p>Cytrox was part of a shadowy alliance of surveillance tech companies known as Intellexa that was formed to compete with NSO Group. Founded in 2019 by a former Israeli military officer and entrepreneur named Tal Dilian, Intellexa includes companies that have run afoul of authorities in various countries for alleged abuses.</p> <p>Four executives of one such firm, Nexa Technologies, were charged in France this year for “complicity of torture” in Libya while criminal charges were filed against three company executives for “complicity of torture and enforced disappearance” in Egypt. The company allegedly sold spy tech to Libya in 2007 and to Egypt in 2014.</p> <p>On its website, Intellexa describes itself as “EU-based and regulated, with six sites and R&D labs throughout Europe,” but lists no address. Its web page is vague about its offerings, although as recently as</p>

October it said that in addition to “covert mass collection” it provides systems “to access target devices and networks” via Wi-Fi and wireless networks. Intellexa said its tools are used by law enforcement and intelligence agencies against terrorists and crimes including financial fraud.

The Associated Press left messages for Dilian and also tried to reach Intellexa through a form on its website, but received no response.

In addition to his involvement in Intellexa, Dilian ran afoul of authorities in Cyprus in 2019 after showing off a “spy van” there to a Forbes reporter. His company was reportedly fined \$1 million as result. He also founded and later sold to NSO Group a company called Circle Technologies, which geolocated cellphones.

The hacker-for-hire industry is facing increased scrutiny as well as regulatory and legal pressure. That includes a call by a group of U.S. lawmakers this week to sanction NSO Group, Nexa and their top executives.

The Biden administration last month added NSO Group and another Israeli firm, Candiru, to a blacklist that bars U.S. companies from providing them with technology. And Apple announced last month that it was suing NSO Group, with the tech giant calling the company's employees “amoral 21st century mercenaries.” Facebook sued NSO Group in 2019 for allegedly violating its WhatsApp messenger app.

Earlier this month, Israel’s Defense Ministry said it was tightening oversight over cybersecurity exports to prevent abuse.

Citizen Lab researchers, who have been tracking NSO Group exploits since 2015, are skeptical. If NSO Group were to disappear tomorrow, competitors could step in without missing a beat with off-the-shelf replacement spyware, they say.

The firms targeted by Facebook in the takedowns announced Thursday included four Israeli companies: Cobwebs, Cognyte, Black Cube, and Bluehawk CI, as well India-based BellTroX and an unknown organization in China. They provide a variety of different kinds of surveillance activity, ranging from simple intelligence collection through fake accounts to wholesale intrusion.

Nour urged international action against hacker-for-hire firms, “whether it comes from Israel or anywhere else. In the end, the biggest problem is those who use these digital monsters to eat and kill innocent people.” That includes nonviolent activists and journalists including Nour's late friend, Jamal Khashoggi.

The Saudi journalist was slain in 2018 at his country’s Istanbul consulate and is also believed to have been targeted by phone-surveillance software.

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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	12/17 Top Pakistan Taliban militant escapes strike
SOURCE	https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211217-top-pakistan-taliban-commander-escapes-suspected-drone-strike
GIST	<p><i>Peshawar (Pakistan) (AFP)</i> – A top leader of the Pakistan Taliban escaped unhurt from a suspected drone strike on a safe house in eastern Afghanistan, the militant group said Friday.</p> <p>The strike on Thursday evening came a week after a ceasefire between the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the government collapsed, with militants accusing Islamabad of killing its fighters.</p> <p>The TTP -- a separate movement but sharing common roots with Afghanistan's new leaders -- plunged Pakistan into a period of horrific violence after forming in 2007.</p>

Two TTP sources currently in Afghanistan told AFP that Maulvi Faqir Mohammad was the target of what they described as a drone strike on a compound in Chawgam village, in the eastern province of Kunar bordering Pakistan.

"Maulvi Faqir Mohammad was not present at the time... two fighters of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan were wounded," one source said.

The compound was being used as a base by TTP fighters from Pakistan crossing the porous border with Afghanistan, he said.

Mohammad was arrested by the previous US-backed Kabul government and spent years in Afghanistan's notorious Bagram prison, but was released after the Taliban's lightning takeover of the country in August.

It was not clear who was responsible for Thursday's attack, but both Pakistan and the United States have previously used unmanned aerial vehicles to conduct assassinations in the region.

Bilal Karimi, a spokesman for the Afghan Taliban, told AFP from Kabul that the strike was an explosive fired from the ground.

The TTP emerged 14 years ago and have been blamed for around 70,000 killings by successive Pakistani governments.

Thursday marked the seventh anniversary of the TTP massacre of nearly 150 schoolchildren in Peshawar, an atrocity that remains seared on Pakistan's national consciousness.

It prompted a 2014 crackdown by the military which crushed the movement and forced its hardline Islamist fighters into hiding in Afghanistan.

Pakistan is now trying to quell a TTP comeback after the victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Female foreign terrorist fighters
SOURCE	https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20211216-female-foreign-terrorist-fighters-repatriation-prosecution-and-rehabilitation-challenges
GIST	<p>Since the 2019 fall of ISIS's so-called "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria, many countries have been faced with the challenge of repatriating female foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) who travelled to the region to participate in the conflict.</p> <p>In its new analysis report, Female Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Challenges in Repatriation, Prosecution, and Rehabilitation, the Counter Extremist Project (CEP) examines the ways in which female FTFs were radicalized; the evolving nature of their repatriation and prosecution; and the differing methods of rehabilitation and reintegration in Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States.</p> <p>Following the territorial defeat of ISIS, an estimated 1,840 to 1,912 total FTFs returned to Western Europe and another 59 returned to the United States. Thus far, approximately 209 female FTFs have returned to the above listed nine countries. Originally, women who travelled to Syria were generally considered "ISIS brides" and were charged and prosecuted leniently in comparison to their male counterparts. Although evidence has suggested that criminal justice systems have steadily began to treat women as violent extremists in the full sense of the word, they have been slower to provide adequate repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration support for women seeking to return to their home countries. Nations across Europe as well as Australia and the United Kingdom have demonstrated increased hesitation towards actively repatriating female FTFs, despite encouragement from the United States, due to heightened concerns of recidivism and domestic security.</p>

	As the report demonstrates, repatriation is an important aspect of breaking the cycle of extremism. It serves as a crucial way for security services to monitor and regulate individuals who they believe to pose a risk to national and global security in the long run. By delaying the repatriation of female foreign fighters, governments' rehabilitation and reentry programs will face a greater challenge in dispelling hardened extremist beliefs. It is vital that governments not only charge and convict female FTFs as appropriate, but also provide the necessary rehabilitation support to mitigate or eradicate any potential future risk.
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HEADLINE	12/17 Afghanistan's women soldiers in hiding
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/dyp37q/afghan-national-army-women-soldiers-taliban
GIST	<p>The collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001 and the establishment of a new Western-backed government paved the way for the inclusion of women in the country's new armed forces.</p> <p>While they faced huge challenges and stigma, by the time the Taliban re-took Afghanistan this summer, there were around 5,000 women working across three security agencies: the Ministry of Defence and the army, the Ministry of Interior and the police, and the National Directory of Security or Afghanistan's secret police.</p> <p>They worked in a variety of positions, from commandos and pilots to domestic violence prevention units. Some of these women left Afghanistan once the Taliban returned, but many did not, and despite the announcement of a general amnesty they are deeply concerned for their safety and that of their families.</p> <p>VICE World News has spoken to an Afghan National Army veteran in her early twenties who has been in hiding since she received threats from the Taliban.</p> <p>The woman joined the army in 2019 and moved up the ranks to become an officer before working with special police units.</p> <p>She said she worked for years in "various areas such as reconnaissance, investigation and fighting the Taliban; I participated in many special operations."</p> <p>"Before the Taliban came to power, I was very happy to work in the security forces and provide for my family," the former officer told VICE World News via WhatsApp. "I wished I could make a lot of progress in the military and reach the leadership level, but now all my dreams have been destroyed."</p> <p>The woman was on duty the day the Taliban entered Kabul and everything changed in an instant.</p> <p>"It was Sunday, I was with my colleagues in the special police forces department building. Unfortunately, I was sick that day and I went to the doctor we had in our centre. All of a sudden, we were radioed to reach [headquarters]. After that, we were ordered to pack up and return to our homes. I took off my military uniform and left in informal clothes. On the way, I saw everyone on all sides in a hurry. I saw the Taliban patrolling on top of [Humvees]. The situation was very bad. My family called me multiple times telling me to be careful. All of my colleagues who were in the same car as me were terrified since everything happened very quickly and our dark days began."</p> <p>Like tens of thousands of others, the woman tried to leave via Kabul's airport, but the situation was complicated by the Taliban controlling the route to the airport.</p> <p>"My friends called me to go to the airport and hopefully from there I could get to another country. I got permission from my family and left, but it was very difficult to go through Taliban checkpoints, I was really scared because I fought against them for years, I was involved in several operations, I was afraid that one of them might notice my face or they would kill me if they figured out who I was. We got close to the airport, everyone was trying to enter, but once I saw the Taliban firing on civilians and injuring several people, I could not stay there, so I went back home. I tried twice but my efforts were unsuccessful."</p>

The former officer, like other women in the army and police, is deeply sceptical of the Taliban's claims that they will not seek retribution against those associated with the deposed Western-backed governments or their armed forces.

"The Taliban found my contact number and called me several times to warn me that they would find me. The database of all security forces working with the previous government is now with the Taliban. After receiving that call, I left my house immediately and currently I live in an undisclosed location, but with a life as a prisoner. I cannot go out and I cannot even take a breath of peace. The Taliban is a savage group and they haven't changed from 20 years ago. There is no amnesty. The Taliban are lying. I wanted to get a passport but my colleagues said I should not go because I will be identified and I might be killed like a number of my colleagues have been. I unfortunately lost several colleagues who were killed by the Taliban. The amnesty is just words, in practice the Taliban are not implementing it."

These are dark days for the former army officer, who has seen her father die and brother arrested since the Taliban returned.

"On the 18th of August, the Taliban arrested my brother near our house on charges of collaborating with the [National Resistance Front](#), and for several days our family did not know where he was being held. I myself could not leave the house. My mother and father tried a lot to find my brother. My brother was with the Taliban for two months, and my father was very worried until he died of a heart attack on the 11th of October, which was the worst day of my life. He died while I was in hiding and my brother was locked away, nobody was even there to help bury my father."

Many of the military officers who worked in the former Afghan government have been the sole breadwinners of their families, and now that they can no longer work, they face economic as well as security problems.

The international community has been a major supporter of women working in Afghanistan's security sector. In the last 20 years, about \$100 million (around £75 million) has been invested by the international community to train female armed officers in Afghanistan.

Women who served as officers in the Afghan military and are still in Afghanistan are calling on human rights organisations, the international community and NATO to help them and evacuate them from Afghanistan as soon as possible.

A small number of these women have been able to flee Afghanistan since the Taliban returned to power, but most have been trapped inside the country. There are no accurate statistics on women military personnel who have been arrested, disappeared or killed since the Taliban took office in Afghanistan.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Stuck in Afghanistan: 60,000 interpreters
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/more-than-60-000-interpreters-visa-applicants-remain-in-afghanistan-11639689706?mod=hp_lead_pos13
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON—More than 60,000 Afghan interpreters and others who have applied for visas to seek shelter in the U.S. after working alongside American forces still remain in Afghanistan, a State Department official said Thursday.</p> <p>About 33,000 Afghans, including principal applicants and their families, have already cleared the more-onerous vetting requirements and could be eligible for immediate evacuation. This is the first time that the State Department has provided a number on those left behind since the Afghanistan government collapsed this summer.</p> <p>A total of 62,000 Afghans are believed to have been left behind, the official said.</p>

U.S. evacuation flights, facilitated by Qatar and local organizers on the ground, have stepped up in recent weeks. Seats are prioritized for Americans and U.S. residents, but some are available for Afghans who have cleared vetting in the visa application process.

The State Department official said that the remaining 29,000 visa applicants are in earlier stages of the application process. The figure doesn't include their family members at this stage. The vetting steps aim to verify their employment history and check for connections to U.S.-designated terrorist groups.

The U.S. is co-organizing a couple of flights a week, but scheduling depends on conditions at Kabul airport—which is only partly operational—and the weather. It could take until well into 2022 to complete the evacuation of those who already qualify for flights. If the other 29,000 visa applicants pass vetting, they too would become eligible for evacuation along with their immediate family members.

The Special Immigrant Visa program was set up in 2009 to help those at risk of Taliban reprisal for helping the U.S., including interpreters for the U.S. military and diplomatic and foreign-aid workers.

The Biden administration came under intense pressure this summer to do more to evacuate applicants, beginning emergency flights out for those who had cleared vetting in July. The premature collapse of the Kabul administration meant that most were left behind.

Afghan visa applicants left behind are increasingly desperate to leave due to [deteriorating economic conditions](#) in the country.

Kianoush, who was approved for an evacuation flight that was scheduled to take place the week that Kabul collapsed in August, is among the thousands waiting for news of a flight. He has been hiding after working on sensitive projects alongside U.S. forces at the Afghan interior ministry.

“We are jobless and the winter is coming. There is no food, or clear future,” he said in a telephone interview.

In the chaotic evacuation effort that took place in the summer, the U.S. and its allies evacuated over 100,000 Afghans. Some made it through the crowds at Kabul airport without paperwork, while American citizens and visa applicants were unable to enter and board flights. More than 70,000 Afghans arrived in the U.S.

The State Department said afterward it believed the majority of Afghans who worked alongside the U.S.-led NATO coalition had been left behind.

The Biden administration promised to evacuate all Americans from Afghanistan after the collapse, but stopped short of offering the same assurances to Afghan allies at risk of retribution.

Since the fall of Kabul the U.S. has relocated 479 Americans and 450 U.S. residents with their families, the State Department said in an update this week. It has also evacuated 2,200 Afghan visa applicants and family members since the fall of Kabul.

Fewer than a dozen U.S. citizens who are ready to leave Afghanistan remain in the country, the State Department said.

Groups of volunteers that have organized private evacuation flights say the true number of Americans who remain and want to leave is higher. This is because the U.S. won't let them bring dependent family members.

Mustafa, 33 years old, is an American who worked as a translator for U.S. forces. He took on responsibility for his sister and six children after her husband was believed killed in the bombing at Kabul's airport. He is staying behind with hope that a private volunteer organization will evacuate him with his sister and children because she would struggle to survive on her own without a male guardian.

	<p>“Mustafa could have left long ago as an American citizen,” said a spokeswoman for Task Force Argo, a volunteer group trying to help him. “He is staying back to protect his family and they are all waiting together in Kabul for an evacuation option that helps non-passport-holders.”</p> <p>The State Department said it must follow U.S. immigration law in regard to evacuations and that only those eligible to enter the U.S. can be evacuated.</p> <p>The U.S. no longer has a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, a factor adding to the difficulty in processing cases.</p> <p>Last month, the U.S. signed an accord with Qatar that established the Gulf nation as the U.S. protecting power in Afghanistan. As part of the agreement, the Qataris agreed to establish a U.S. interests section within its embassy to provide consular services and monitor U.S. diplomatic facilities in Afghanistan.</p> <p>There is no date set for reopening an embassy.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Guilty plea: 2020 L.A. train derailment
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/engineer-pleads-guilty-terrorism-la-train-derailment-81801771
GIST	<p>LOS ANGELES -- An train engineer who intentionally derailed a locomotive near a U.S. Navy hospital ship that was deployed in Los Angeles harbor to help during the COVID-19 pandemic pleaded guilty Thursday to committing a terrorist attack.</p> <p>Eduardo Moreno, 45, who worked at the Port of Los Angeles, acknowledged in his plea agreement that on March 31, 2020, he drove a locomotive at full speed off the end of the tracks near where the Mercy was docked because he believed it might be involved in a sinister conspiracy, the U.S. attorney's office said in a statement.</p> <p>Nobody was hurt but the derailment caused about \$700,000 in damages. The train also spilled fuel that required a hazardous-materials cleanup.</p> <p>Moreno told port police that he was suspicious of the Mercy “and believed it had an alternate purpose related to COVID-19 or a government takeover,” the U.S. attorney's office said, citing court documents.</p> <p>Moreno said he knew the derailment would bring media attention and he wanted to “wake people up,” according to an affidavit filed with the criminal complaint.</p> <p>The train smashed through concrete, steel and chain-link barriers and slid through a parking lot before coming to a stop about 250 yards (228 meters) from the Mercy, officials said.</p> <p>Moreno said he acted alone and hadn't planned the derailment in advance, prosecutors said.</p> <p>Moreno could face up to 20 years in prison when he is sentenced in March. However, prosecutors said they will seek a 6 1/2-year sentence and \$700,000 in restitution to the Pacific Harbor Line railroad company.</p> <p>The 1,000-bed Mercy, based at Naval Base San Diego, docked at the Port of Los Angeles in March 2020 to accept non-coronavirus patients to prevent local hospitals from being overwhelmed as cases surged.</p> <p>However, the initial rise in hospitalizations wasn't as severe as expected. The Mercy's crew treated about 80 people before departing in mid-May.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Iraq in fragile partnership to combat IS
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SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/fragile-partnership-iraq-prevent-revival-81807597
GIST	<p>LHEIBAN, Iraq -- As a backhoe dug up the ground to build trenches, Iraqi soldiers scanned the vast farming tracts for militants; not far away, their Kurdish counterparts did the same.</p> <p>The scene earlier this month in the small northern Iraqi farming village of Lheiban was a rare instance of coordination between the federal government and the semi-autonomous Kurdish region. The two sides were fortifying a joint position aimed at defending the village against attacks by the Islamic State group.</p> <p>Despite a long-standing territorial dispute, Baghdad and Iraq's Kurds are taking steps to work together to prevent a resurgence of the Islamic State group.</p> <p>Whether the fragile security partnership can hold is the big test in the next chapter of Iraq's war with IS. Both sides say they need the Americans to help keep it together — and they say that is one reason why the U.S. military presence in Iraq is not going away even as its combat mission officially ends on Dec. 31.</p> <p>Iraq declared IS defeated four years ago this month. But the rivalry between Baghdad and the Kurds opened up cracks through which IS crept back: a long, disputed zone snaking through four provinces -- Nineveh, Kirkuk, Salaheddin and Diyala -- where the forces of either side did not enter. In some places, the zone was up to 40 kilometers (24 miles) wide.</p> <p>Lheiban lies in one part of the zone, and a recent flurry of IS attacks threatened to empty the area of its residents, mostly Kurds. So for the first time since 2014, Iraqi troops and peshmerga are setting up joint coordination centers around the zone to better police the gaps.</p> <p>"Daesh took advantage," said Capt. Nakib Hajar, head of Kurdish peshmerga operations in the area, using the Arabic acronym for IS. Now, he said, "we are coordinating ... It begins here, in this village."</p> <p>NIGHT VISIONS</p> <p>Like all residents of Lheiban, Helmet Zahir is tired. In past months, the cement factory worker would spend all night on the roof of his humble home, his wife and children sleeping inside, holding his rifle and waiting.</p> <p>Security personnel guarding a nearby oil company -- the only ones in the area equipped with thermal night vision -- would send the signal when they spotted IS militants making their way down the Qarachok Mountain range toward Lheiban.</p> <p>It was up to Zahir and other armed residents to fend them off.</p> <p>"We were abandoned. The peshmerga was on one side, the Iraqi army on another and neither was intervening," he said.</p> <p>A recent uptick in attacks on the village, with three in the first week of December alone, prompted many of the village's residents, who are mainly Kurds, to leave. Zahir moved his family to Debaga in the relative safety of the Kurdish-run north.</p> <p>Once numbering 65 families, Lheiban now has only 12 left, said village mukhtar Yadgar Karim.</p> <p>On Dec. 7, peshmerga and Iraqi forces moved into the village with plans to replicate coordination elsewhere across the disputed territories. Kurdish officials hoped this would prompt villagers to return. Maintaining a Kurdish population in the area is key to their territorial claims.</p> <p>Zahir is not convinced. "I came to check on the situation only, I am too afraid to return," he said.</p>

The peshmerga have positions all along the ridge of the Qarachok mountains. But they don't have orders to stop IS militants as they cross on attacks or to raid IS positions because of wariness over entering disputed territory, explained Col. Kahar Jawhar.

Moreover, the militants move at night, using tunnels and hiding in caves, and the peshmerga lack key equipment including night vision.

"That is why IS are able to terrorize the residents, because we can't see them," Jawhar said.

DISPUTED LAND

The talks to re-establish joint coordination centers between the Iraqi army and peshmerga began over two years ago, but fell apart because of deep mistrust and differences over how to carve out lines of control.

Under current Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, talks were rekindled, paving the way for an agreement to set up six joint coordination centers in Baghdad, Irbil, and across the disputed zone.

Kadhimi also agreed to establish two joint brigades to conduct anti-IS operations. But this is awaiting budget approval from Baghdad's Finance Ministry, said Hajar Ismail, peshmerga head of relations with the coalition.

Between 2009-2014, Iraqi and Kurdish forces conducted joint security in the northern provinces of Ninevah, Kirkuk and Diyala. But the collapse of the Iraqi army during the IS onslaught of 2014 ended the arrangement.

Kurdish authorities managed to solidify control over Kirkuk and other disputed areas during this time, even developing oil fields and conducting an independent export policy, to the ire of the federal government.

After Iraq declared victory over IS in 2017, Baghdad turned its sights to these areas, launching a military operation in October 2017 to retake them. Relations soured, with Baghdad cutting off budget allocations to the Kurdish region, rendering it unable to pay public sector workers and debts to oil companies.

Baghdad was long reluctant to resume security talks partly due to political optics in the capital, with many dominant Shiite parties deeply mistrustful of Kurdish intentions, according to federal officials.

The Popular Mobilization Forces, made up largely of Shiite militia groups close to Iran, has opposed joint patrols with the peshmerga. The PMF also has a powerful presence in many areas in the disputed zone.

So far, the PMF has been surprisingly quiet about the new joint arrangement, as it copes with a devastating loss in federal elections earlier this year.

But "at some point they will speak out against it," Zmkan Ali, a senior researcher at the Institute of Regional and International Studies, a research center in Sulaymaniyah.

COMMON FRIEND

The road to better coordination has often involved a common friend: The U.S.

Iraqi and Kurdish officials said the U.S.-led coalition's mediation and support were key in bringing parties to the table.

"They played an important role, coordinating with us and the Iraqi side," said Jawhar, the peshmerga based in Qarachok. "Without them we wouldn't speak — they wouldn't come here, and we wouldn't go there."

	<p>Both sides say they still need the Americans to play that role.</p> <p>U.S. troops quietly stopped direct involvement in combat against IS months ago and have since been advising and training troops. That role will continue when the combat mission formally ends on Dec. 31.</p> <p>The U.S. presence is also crucial in other ways. The Americans pay the salaries of many peshmerga fighters, amid ongoing budget disputes with Baghdad. Some \$240 million in U.S. funding covers the salaries of around 45,000 peshmerga personnel, according to Ismail.</p> <p>“Thankfully, this will continue in 2022,” he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Afghan currency slides, prices surge
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/afghan-currency-slides-prices-surge-economy-worsens-81807868
GIST	<p>HERAT, Afghanistan -- The value of Afghanistan’s currency is tumbling, exacerbating an already severe economic crisis and deepening poverty in a country where more than half the population already doesn’t have enough to eat.</p> <p>The afghani lost more than 11% of its value against the U.S. dollar in the space of a day earlier this week, before recouping somewhat. But the market remains volatile, and the devaluation is already impacting Afghans.</p> <p>Afghanistan’s economy was already troubled when the international community froze billions of dollars’ worth of Afghanistan’s assets abroad and stopped all international funding to the country after the Taliban assumed power in mid-August amid a chaotic U.S. and NATO troop withdrawal. The consequences have been dire for a country heavily dependent on foreign aid.</p> <p>Afghanistan was also slated to access about \$450 million on Aug. 23 from the International Monetary Fund, but the IMF blocked the release because of a “lack of clarity” about the country’s new rulers. Since then, international envoys have warned of a looming economic meltdown and humanitarian catastrophe.</p> <p>“People have no money and the prices have gone up,” said Sayed Umid, a 28-year-old shopkeeper selling basic food items such as rice, beans and pulses in a main shopping street in the western Afghan city of Herat.</p> <p>“Since this morning I haven’t had a single customer,” he said. With rent to pay on his shop and home expenses, he worries he can no longer make ends meet.</p> <p>Khan Afzal Hadawal, former acting governor of Afghanistan’s central bank, said that the sanctions on the Taliban and the freezing of Afghanistan’s reserve funds “have put the country’s aid-dependent economy on the verge of full economic collapse, leading to historic depreciation of currency,”</p> <p>“The development agencies, donors, the international community, the U.S., all these should help in this crisis,” he said. “We do understand the concerns of the international community but there are mechanisms (that) can help to manage the crisis and to assist the Afghan people.”</p> <p>According to the United Nations’ World Food Program, 22.8 million of Afghanistan’s 38 million people already face acute food insecurity, and malnutrition in the country is increasing. A combination of the coronavirus pandemic, a severe drought and the Taliban takeover have left many without jobs, and the currency’s sliding value has been pushing up food prices.</p> <p>Shopkeeper Jafar Agha said the price of a large container of cooking oil was about 700 afghanis three months ago (roughly \$8 at the time), but now costs about 1,800 afghanis (around \$18).</p>

“My business has fallen to zero,” he said. “I’m not selling because people have no money. ... We don’t have any hope for the future.”

In the bedlam of the Herat Money Exchange market, traders frantically check the ever-changing currency rate on their mobile phones as they jostle through the crowd shouting out prices and waving wads of cash.

A taser-wielding guard keeps the entrance free from the crush, the sound of its sharp clicks enough to send money changers scurrying past into the exchange.

Wednesday wasn’t a good day for trader Said Nadir. He sold U.S. dollars at a rate of 105 afghanis, but then bought at 113 afghanis to the dollar as the currency began to slide and he worried it might fall further.

“The situation is very bad. When the price increases, we cannot find dollars,” he said.

In early August, the afghani was trading at around 80 to the dollar, jumping to around 90 in October. It briefly spiked from 110 on Sunday to 123 on Monday, before recouping somewhat. On Thursday it was trading at around 100 afghanis to the dollar.

For Farzad Haidari, a 34-year-old who imports and sells women’s shawls and scarves, the currency fluctuations have wreaked havoc on his business.

Importing many of his goods from neighboring Iran and with rent on his store in a shopping mall in central Herat set in dollars, he’s seen much of his income evaporate. If the situation continues and prices keep increasing, he said, he could be forced to close his shop.

“Before, when there was uncertainty because of war, we had our business,” he said. “Now there is security, but we’re losing our business.”

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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	12/17 Climate crisis: warmer winters havoc
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/dec/17/warmer-winters-climate-crisis-scientists
GIST	<p>As climate scientist Kai Kornhuber walks around New York City this winter, an eerie feeling creeps into his body. It’s warm enough for a T-shirt in December, and the birds are chirping loudly.</p> <p>The temperatures tell birds and trees that it’s time for action, but the systems are out of sync for December, says Kornhuber, a postdoctoral researcher at Columbia University’s Earth Institute.</p> <p>“It’s not right, there’s a disconnect between how it should be and how it is.” Kornhuber said.</p> <p>Warmer winters are happening across the globe, and leading to some big impacts: 2021 brought the planet’s 16th-warmest February since records began.</p> <p>While the popular imagination might associate the climate crisis with scorching summers and their attendant droughts, wildfires, hurricanes and heat waves, milder winters can also be drivers of catastrophic weather events and profound changes. They range from shifts in agricultural use, triggering changing weather patterns to boosting the likelihood of violent events, like the swarm of tornadoes that wreaked havoc in the American midwest and south over last weekend.</p> <p>“One of the truisms in climate science is that cold places and cold times of year warm faster than the warmer places and warmer times of year,” says Daniel Swain, a climate scientist at UCLA studying how extreme events are changing on a warming Earth. “Not only is the actual rate of warming faster in colder</p>

seasons and places – like the Arctic, which is warming three times faster than other places – but also a lot of impacts that are associated with warming are amplified.”

Swain points to one specific threshold where temperature has a huge impact: whether precipitation falls as liquid rain or frozen snow depends on just a single degree difference. And in the west of America, where there was a gigantic snow drought until just a few days ago, that has huge impacts.

“There was wildfire risk up until last week, even at 8-9,000ft in elevation,” says Swain. “That has directly to do with the lack of snowpack.”

When precipitation falls as snow, it sticks around for longer, creating runoff moisture for the spring season – it’s often referred to as the bank of future water for moisture-strapped places. But when it falls as rain, it runs off immediately. “Winter warming affects the frozenness – or not – of things, which is ecologically important for the accumulation of snowpack and the water supply,” explains Swain.

Warm spells in winter can create extreme heat waves later in summer. Unseasonal warmth can lead to a premature snow melt and vegetation growth, which lowers soil moisture and amplifies the likelihood of extreme and persistent heat waves throughout the summer, says Kornhuber. He points to the chain of events that led up to a heatwave that [rocked Siberia in 2020](#) and was associated with wildfires that lasted the whole summer and caused record breaking carbon emissions.

In that event, late-winter heat in February and March sucked moisture from the soils at a time when vegetation was also taking up moisture – and parched soils can lead to summer heat waves, says Kornhuber. “Low soil moisture is one of the most important ingredients of mega heatwaves.”

Climate model projections for the United States indicate that overall there will be an increase in the likelihood of conditions favorable to severe storms as the planet warms, says Chiara Lepore, an associate research scientist at Lamont Doherty Earth Observatory at Columbia University.

Lepore published [research last month](#) predicting 14-25% increase in severe storms per every extra 1C degree of future global temperature increase.

“The main driving mechanism is warming temperatures and increasing moisture, which are some of the major ingredients in storm updrafts.” She adds that that number represents the increasing frequency of conditions favorable to severe weather occurrence – not actual storms – and only some of these storms will produce tornadoes, she says. “The uncertainty is still large.”

Swain says the climate crisis evidence is weaker for tornadoes than for other huge storms, but that’s mainly because it hasn’t been studied as much. “The vertical instability – which is likely with more warming – would create an increase in tornado-producing environments,” he says. “So it’s pretty clear that climate change will begin to increase the likelihood of severe convective weather.”

Warmer winters can also impact agriculture, as some crops require a threshold of chill hours to achieve optimal outcomes. Cold temperatures that many orchard crops need could [decrease by as much as 60%](#) in California’s Central Valley by 2100. Researchers say apples, cherries and pears, which require the longest period of cold weather, could be hit the hardest.

Late-winter heat can also wreak havoc on crops, if they get the biological signal to flourish, only to be knocked down by frost soon after budding. “It goes to show that relatively small amounts of global warming can have big effects in certain places and certain times of year,” says Swain.

There is even evidence that climate change is at the heart of freak events like the cold snap that left Texas in a deep arctic freeze last February, causing hundreds of deaths and billions of dollars in damage. A [weak polar vortex](#) became divided and brought a big gush of cold air to the southern United States – and the vortex is more [unstable than in the past](#).

	Kornhuber says that winter warming is essentially another form of saying that the summer season extends more and more, while the spring and fall transitions squeeze out what we used to think of as wintertime. "As temperatures increase, moderate climate zones just will not have winter the way we know it anymore."
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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	12/16 Curbing violent crime in South King Co.
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/local-state-and-federal-law-enforcement-discuss-strategies-to-curb-violent-crime-in-south-king-county
GIST	<p>DES MOINES, WASH. - Local, state and federal law enforcement partners held a meeting to discuss various strategies to address the increase in violence in South King County on Thursday.</p> <p>There were about 50 participants from Des Moines, Federal Way, Kent, Renton, Bellevue and SeaTac Police Departments, King County Sheriff's Office, WA State Department of Corrections, Secret Service, Homeland Security, King County Prosecutor's Office, Washington State Patrol, FBI, ATF, DEA and the Washington State Fusion Center.</p> <p>Chief Ken Thomas of Des Moines Police Department said, "There was a lot of frustration in the room due to a lot of the violence that's occurring, but there was a lot of optimism also that we are going to do what we can, everything within our power, to address the violence and really go after those people that are the most responsible for some of the gang activity, some of the drug activity and of course the violence that is occurring in South King County."</p> <p>Currently, Des Moines is experiencing the highest levels of homicides and violent crimes in the city's history, according to Chief Thomas.</p> <p>"We're in a time of significant violent crime activity, and it's really incumbent upon us as law enforcement leaders to do everything we can to address that," said Chief Thomas. "There is a lot of fear in that area, and really it's our job as law enforcement to not only come up with a plan but execute a plan that's sustainable."</p> <p>Chief Thomas said Des Moines and Kent Police share the intersection of Kent-Des Moines Road and Pacific High Way South, and in that area alone there have been at least seven shootings and two homicides in the last two months.</p> <p>Multiple police agencies are now implementing similar strategies. Kent Police said officers are working with businesses in the area to find solutions, doing in-depth investigations to make arrests and implementing high visibility patrols and enforcement.</p> <p>The Chief said there will be heightened enforcement of drug, gang and gun activity.</p> <p>The police department will deploy behavioral health workers to engage with people who are experiencing homelessness and drug addiction along Pacific Highway S.</p> <p>"Most importantly, it takes good solid prosecution and accountability for those that are engaged in wrongdoing to ensure that we can make an impact," said Chief Thomas.</p> <p>The King County Executive's Office, mayors and police chiefs in South King County, judges and the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office (KCPAO) had a meeting on Wednesday night to start discussing a coordinated safety plan.</p>

	<p>"We all have the same goals. We want decreased recidivism. We want people to feel safe and be safe and the more we can talk honestly with one another like we did last night, I think the better off," said spokesperson Casey McNerthney of the KCPAO.</p> <p>Chief Thomas believes it's going to take at least one or two years to start making a lasting sustainable impact.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 HS student arrest: bringing gun to school
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/lynnwood-high-school-student-arrested-for-bringing-gun-to-school
GIST	<p>LYNNWOOD, Wash. - A Meadowdale High School student has been arrested after admitting to bringing a pistol and ammunition to school.</p> <p>According to Lynnwood police, the 15-year-old boy admitted to showing the gun to several other students on Dec. 16, one of whom told their parents and the parents notified police.</p> <p>The pistol and ammunition were recovered from the teen's room. Police determined the gun belonged to a relative and that the teen stole it from that relative's safe several months ago, without the relative being aware.</p> <p>The teen was booked into the Denney Juvenile Justice Center in Everett for theft of a firearm-domestic violence and second-degree unlawful possession of a firearm.</p> <p>This is the second incident to occur in the district in the span of a day.</p> <p>On Dec. 15, a 14-year-old boy was arrested for allegedly sending threatening texts to another student.</p> <p>Police say they were called by a Meadowdale student's parents, who said he received threatening texts from a schoolmate. These texts included images of weapons, and also indicated an intent to harm others in the school, authorities say.</p> <p>Officers went to the suspect student's house, a 14-year-old boy, and arrested him and booked him into the Denney Juvenile Justice Center for harassment and threats.</p> <p>"The Lynnwood Police Department and the Edmonds School District work collaboratively and aggressively to ensure our schools are safe. The suspects involved in these kinds of cases will be held accountable," Lynnwood police said.</p> <p>These incidents in Lynnwood are one of the dozens reported across western Washington in the last month.</p> <p>It appears that there is a viral TikTok challenge going around nationwide where students are challenged to make such threats against their school.</p> <p>In a vast majority of the western Washington cases, the threats were written on bathroom stalls. It's unclear if that is part of the challenge.</p> <p>In Northshore, where there have already been threats, the district issued a statement on the threats and the apparent "trend:"</p> <p><i>"We have become aware of a troubling post that has been shared widely this week on a social media platform. The post refers to a threat to school safety "for every school in the USA, even elementary," on Friday, Dec. 17.</i></p> <p><i>The post appears to be part of a national trend on that platform and did not originate in our school district. We have heard reports from other districts that the same post is circulating in their schools. While we do not believe the threat to be credible, we are closely monitoring the situation and taking it seriously out of an abundance of caution. Our first priority is to keep our students and staff safe."</i></p>

HEADLINE	12/16 Seattle police arrest 35: shoplifting; let go
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/seattle-police-make-arrests-in-organized-shoplifting-ring-at-downtown-target/281-912bde20-e4e4-4f8d-9fda-527cd526b8f5
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — The Seattle Police Department (SPD) arrested 35 people for stealing thousands of dollars of merchandise from the downtown Target store, Wednesday.</p> <p>The stolen items, which officers recovered, included bottles of liquor, cutlery, kitchen sets and detergent, SPD said, calling the shoplifting “organized”.</p> <p>Officers identified the accused thieves, gave them trespassing notices, and then let them go.</p> <p>That’s because shoplifting items \$750 or less in value is a misdemeanor, and King County is not booking people into jail for low-level crimes.</p> <p>“If they do come back (and) attempt to do this again, then we have a reason to actually get them booked into jail,” said SPD Det. Patrick Michaud.</p> <p>One man was booked into jail because he had a Department of Corrections warrant, Michaud said.</p> <p>It’ll be up to the City Attorney’s Office to decide whether to prosecute the accused shoplifters.</p> <p>Incoming City Attorney Ann Davison has vowed to take a harder stance on these crimes.</p> <p>“I think it’s a good first step to show that there’s some accountability here and consequences for your actions because this has been happening in plain sight for far too long,” said Jon Scholes, President and CEO of the Downtown Seattle Association.</p> <p>He said the problem has gotten worse in recent months.</p> <p>“This shoplifting is not just costing businesses money, but it’s really fueling a drug market in our city and this is the capital that drug traffickers are using to operate their enterprise, and there’s lots of folks that are homeless, that are vulnerable, that are caught up in all of this,” Scholes said.</p> <p>SPD it could make a much larger dent in the problem if it had more officers and resources.</p> <p>“It’s one of those ‘drop-in-a-bucket’ stories because every day there are 100, 120 people walking out of a store downtown with stolen items, but it’s a step in the right direction,” Michaud said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Organized retail crime really that high?
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/retailers-say-theft-is-at-crisis-levels-the-numbers-say-otherwise/
GIST	<p>Organized retail crime is haunting the nation this holiday season.</p> <p>Captured on smartphones and closed-circuit cameras, thefts involving groups of people smashing windows or individuals wheeling loaded shopping carts out the door have been looping on social media and TV news, raising the specter that crime rings reselling boosted merchandise present a major threat to retailers.</p> <p>With industry groups sounding the alarm, politicians have declared the issue a priority. Police and prosecutors say criminal justice reforms need to be rolled back to deter smash-and-grabs.</p> <p>Rachel Michelin, president of the California Retailers Association, contended that, in San Francisco and Oakland alone, businesses lose \$3.6 billion to organized retail crime each year. That would mean retail</p>

gangs steal nearly 25% of total sales in San Francisco and Oakland combined, which amounted to around \$15.5 billion in 2019, according to the state agency that tracks sales tax.

Can that be right? In a word: no.

Although some retail and law enforcement lobbyists cite eye-popping figures, there is reason to doubt the problem is anywhere near as large as they say. The best estimates available put losses at around 7 cents per \$100 of sales on average.

The country's largest retail industry group, the National Retail Federation, estimated in its latest report that losses from organized retail theft average [\\$700,000 per \\$1 billion](#) in sales — or 0.07% of total sales — an amount roughly 330 times lower than the California trade association estimate.

An industry advocate made a similar error in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee in early November. At [a hearing](#) on regulating online marketplaces, Ben Dugan, president of the National Coalition of Law Enforcement and Retail, or CLEAR, told the committee that “CLEAR estimates that organized retail crime accounts for \$45 billion in annual losses for retailers.”

When asked where that number came from, Rich Rossman, vice president of CLEAR, said that it was pulled from the National Retail Federation's report. But the NRF puts all losses to theft and fraud from all sources at around \$45 billion, not losses to organized retail crime.

With the 55 member companies that responded to its latest annual survey representing about 25% of all U.S. retail sales, the National Retail Federation has the clearest window into broader trends, said Mark Mathews, who leads the NRF's research team.

Its latest report found that total inventory losses from theft, fraud and paperwork errors grew from 1.4% to 1.6% of sales on average from 2015 to 2020. The estimated portion of those losses coming from organized retail crime grew from 0.045% to 0.07% in the same time frame.

With \$3.1 trillion in bricks-and-mortar retail sales in 2020, that puts estimates for total losses at \$49.6 billion and losses to organized retail crime at \$2.1 billion nationwide.

Mathews said some categories of retailers face higher rates of organized retail theft, with those that sell easily portable and salable goods at higher risk. In his Senate testimony, Dugan reported that CVS Health loses more than \$200 million a year to organized retail crime, or 0.21% of its \$91 billion in 2020 retail revenue.

The Retail Industry Leaders Assn. released its own report, which put a nearly \$70-billion price tag on total retail crime, in late November as part of its campaign with a spinoff group, the Buy Safe America Coalition, to lobby for a federal bill that would make it more difficult for people to anonymously sell goods on internet marketplaces.

The current version of that bill, the INFORM Consumers Act, would require online marketplaces such as eBay, Etsy and Amazon to verify the identity of sellers who make hundreds of sales or bring in more than \$20,000 a year with their accounts. A group that includes Etsy and eBay, along with other online marketplaces, has endorsed the law, but the National Retail Federation, which counts Amazon among its members, has refrained from weighing in.

Broader crime statistics paint a picture of a decreasing problem, not one on the rise. National crime statistics from the FBI show shoplifting decreasing steadily every year from 2015 through 2020, the most recent data available. Larceny — the taking of property without using force or breaking in — declined 16% between 2010 and 2019, then dipped even lower in 2020, the data indicate.

	<p>One thing that has gone up is the visibility of open theft from stores. Ubiquitous security cameras and smartphones mean that few crimes go unrecorded, and videos of people loading up bags and carts with products and walking out the door make for viral content.</p> <p>The spectacular nature of the recent smash-and-grab robberies might lead to beefed-up security staffing and putting more products behind lock and key, security consultant Chris McGoeysaid. But he doubts it.</p> <p>“Modern merchandising is about getting your merchandise up in front. You want it highly visible,” McGoeysaid. “We’ve gone through cycles where you put high-theft items in locked cases, but that’s anti-merchandising.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 US \$5M bounties on 4 of ‘El Chapo’ sons
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/4aw3wm/the-us-just-put-dollar5-million-bounties-on-4-of-el-chapos-sons
GIST	<p>MEXICO CITY—The U.S. government just offered a \$5 million reward to anyone with information that could lead to the capture of each of Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán Loera’s sons.</p> <p>Commonly known as Los Chapitos, the men are infamous for their brash and ostentatious behavior and displays on social media. One of them—Ovidio Guzmán López—was captured but released by the Mexican government in 2019 in an incident that proved a national embarrassment for the administration of Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador.</p> <p>The announcement from the Biden administration came on the heels of a similar bounty placed on the head of El Chapo’s brother, Aureliano Guzmán Loera aka Guano, and the tripling of the reward for his former Sinaloa Cartel partner Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada to \$15 million.</p> <p>After El Chapo’s arrest and extradition in 2017, his sons—Iván Archivaldo Guzmán Salazar, Jesús Alfredo Guzmán Salazar, Ovidio Guzmán López, and Joaquín Guzmán López—are believed to have become prominent leaders of a faction of the Sinaloa Cartel. The fresh bounty on each of their heads puts the young Guzmáns in a tier with some of Mexico’s other most wanted criminals.</p> <p>“All four are high-ranking members of the Sinaloa Cartel and are each subject to a federal indictment for their involvement in the illicit drug trade,” said the U.S. Department of State when announcing the reward.</p> <p>The eldest brother, Iván Archivaldo, first made headlines in the early 2000s after the death of a Canadian exchange student in Guadalajara. Kristen Deyell left a nightclub with a man named César Pulido, who had reportedly been involved in a fight inside the club over the Canadian student. The two were ambushed outside and shot to death. Iván Archivaldo was the prime suspect and spent the next few years in and out of prison battling charges over the murder, along with money laundering and organized crime allegations. He was eventually freed in 2008 and Deyell and Pulido’s murders remain unsolved.</p> <p>Both Iván Archivaldo and his younger brother Jesús Alfredo started making waves for their use of social media, with unverified accounts linked to the brothers regularly posting photos and videos of guns, money, and women. But as the hunt for El Chapo increased during the mid-2010s, the sons tempered their social media use as they reportedly became more involved in the family business. The original accounts have been removed from Twitter.</p> <p>El Chapo escaped prison in 2001, allegedly in a laundry cart, and ran the business while on the lam until finally being arrested in 2014. He escaped prison again in 2015, and was recaptured six months later. The kingpin was soon extradited to the U.S. and found guilty in 2019 in a New York court. El Chapo is currently serving a life sentence on drug, weapons, and money laundering charges at a Colorado supermax penitentiary.</p> <p>With El Chapo’s January 2016 arrest and extradition on the horizon, the power vacuum began to cause conflict between different factions within the Sinaloa Cartel, and other cartels also tried to take advantage of the situation. The fighting directly hit the brothers when Iván Archivaldo and Jesús Alfredo were</p>

[kidnapped](#) in August 2016 by members of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG for its Spanish acronym). The [brothers were released](#) within a week after members of the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG reportedly brokered their release in exchange for guaranteeing the protection of the incarcerated son of Nemesio Oseguera, alias El Mencho, the boss of the CJNG.

But Los Chapitos truly entered the public consciousness after the arrest of a third Guzmán brother, Ovidio, in October 2019. Mexican soldiers [attempted to arrest Ovidio](#) in a house in Culiacán, the capital of the state of Sinaloa and family stronghold, but were soon fought off by cartel gunmen. Ovidio's brothers reportedly sent hundreds of cartel foot soldiers onto the streets of the city who engaged in hours of gunfights with state forces that left at least eight people dead and many injured. Cartel gunmen also entered a military housing complex and threatened the families of Mexican soldiers stationed in Sinaloa.

Mexican President López Obrador promptly ordered the release of Ovidio to stop the bloodshed, but his capture and release was seen as a sign of the state's inability to combat organized crime.

López Obrador answered questions about the bumbling of the 2019 arrest Thursday morning, the day after the U.S. rewards were announced, and said the government was committed to capturing Los Chapitos.

“We did not want more people to lose their lives,” López Obrador [said at a press conference](#). “If we did well or did wrong, history will tell. I was the one who made the decision to stop the operation.”

Since the extradition of their father, Los Chapitos have been rumored to have engaged in conflicts not only with other cartels, but with other factions of the Sinaloa Cartel and even their uncle—El Guano.

El Guano, the elder brother of El Chapo, is [believed to control](#) much of the area surrounding the small town in the Sinaloan sierra where the Guzmán Loera family hails from. In November, the U.S. announced a \$5 million dollar bounty on his head as well.

There have been reports of conflicts between El Guano and his nephews, Los Chapitos, with [two videos of gunfights](#) between the two factions emerging from March and April 2021. However, a source close to the Guzmán family told VICE World News that recently the uncle and nephews have buried the hatchet and are no longer feuding. VICE World News could not independently verify that claim.

On Wednesday, a video went viral of the alleged cousin of Los Chapitos and Guano's son—Aureliano Guzmán Araujo—[firing a gun into the air](#) inside a bar in Culiacán. He was reportedly detained afterward, then [released by authorities](#).

The children of drug lords are commonly called Narco Juniors and have often tried to imitate the success of their parents in the criminal underworld. While all four of El Chapo's sons are believed to have become important players in the Sinaloa cartel, others haven't been so lucky. Another of El Chapo's sons, Édgar Guzmán López, was gunned down in Culiacán in 2008 amid his father's feud with the Beltrán Leyva faction of the Sinaloa cartel.

El Mayo Zambada, the long-time partner of El Chapo, has had [three sons arrested](#) and imprisoned for their [involvement in the drug trade](#). El Mayo has gained fame for being able to maintain his status as one of the biggest drug traffickers in the world, and never being arrested. In October, the U.S. government [tripled the bounty](#) on his head from \$5 million to \$15 million, hoping to change that.

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HEADLINE	12/16 DHS expands 'no-go zones' ICE arrests
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/16/dhs-protected-areas-policy-makes-dc-a-city-of-sanc/
GIST	Any Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer who wants to arrest an illegal immigrant in the District of Columbia will have to hope the target is sunning in Rock Creek Park or rowing on the Anacostia River.

Those are some of the few places in the city not affected by Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas' new rules discouraging immigration enforcement near sensitive locations.

Schools and hospitals have long been no-go zones, but Mr. Mayorkas added food banks, homeless shelters, child advocacy groups, community-based organizations, school bus stops, day care centers and any other place where children might congregate. He said enforcing the law "near" those locations is virtually barred.

Mr. Mayorkas said people, including illegal immigrants, deserve to access services unfettered, so anywhere they get them should be considered off-limits except in exceptional circumstances.

The Washington Times took a map of the District of Columbia and plotted a fraction of off-limits locations — schools, day care centers, clinics, playgrounds, community centers, some churches, and some social services locations — figuring a 500-foot radius, or about half a city block, as the no-go zone.

The result is a city of sanctuaries.

Immigrant-heavy areas such as Mount Pleasant and Columbia Heights, and the Georgia Avenue corridor through Petworth and Brightwood, are saturated with protected areas. Capitol Hill, downtown Washington and much of the city south of the Anacostia River also are crammed with no-go zones.

Even wide-open spaces, such as Rock Creek Park and the National Arboretum, which don't show up as protected on The Times' map, could arguably be considered off-limits if an ICE supervisor deems them to be places where children might congregate.

There is nothing special about the District. ICE officers say you could draw the same map in just about every major U.S. city, effectively shrinking the space immigration agents have to operate under the Biden administration.

The rules apply not only to arrests but also to other "enforcement" actions such as tracking a target or conducting surveillance on a home or worksite.

One ICE officer pointed out that many of the agency's office locations are in or near buildings that house day care centers. Taking the new rules literally could mean they aren't supposed to be doing enforcement at their desks.

That officer called the rules "a trap."

Chris Crane, president of the National ICE Council, said the list is so poorly written that it seems "intentionally written to foil law enforcement."

"This is self-sabotage," Mr. Crane said.

ICE said the policy doesn't prohibit all enforcement in the protected areas.

"The facts of each individual case and the exercise of judgment by the ICE officer will guide determination on cases that warrant enforcement action," the agency said in a statement to The Washington Times.

The guidance ICE published does allow for exceptional cases and requires a supervisor's approval before any enforcement action can take place, except for instances of hot pursuit or immediate danger to the community.

Just say no

ICE has had a “sensitive locations” policy on the books for a decade, dating to the Obama administration. An officer or agent needed a compelling reason and prior approval to make an immigration arrest at a school, house of worship or hospital.

The list Mr. Mayorkas issued in October goes further, discouraging all enforcement “near” those locations and adding an extensive list of others: places where “children gather,” homeless shelters, drug counseling or rehabilitation centers, food banks or any other “community-based organization.”

Mr. Mayorkas also changed the name of the arrest-limiting policy from “sensitive locations” to “protected areas.” He said he wanted to make clear that these areas should be considered no-go zones unless there are truly extraordinary reasons.

The policy applies to ICE and the Border Patrol, limiting their range of action.

Mr. Mayorkas said the policy is an effort to make agents and officers at ICE and Customs and Border Protection pay attention to the communities in which they operate. They must consider “broader societal interests,” he said.

“We can accomplish our law enforcement mission without denying individuals access to needed medical care, children access to their schools, the displaced access to food and shelter, people of faith access to their places of worship, and more,” he said.

One officer described to The Times how enforcement is likely to happen under the new rules in a city like Washington. He said the usual target will be someone the city has released from its jails thanks to its sanctuary policy.

An officer who learns of the release would check the last known address and then check a map for any off-limits locations. Then the officer will approach supervisors, who must decide whether to approve surveillance notwithstanding the protected locations. Given the press of business and agency priorities, the requests are usually denied, the officer said.

The agency’s frequently asked questions memo on the new rules says exceptions will be “limited.”

“The reality of this will be that supervisors are just going to say ‘no,’” Mr. Crane said. “It’s getting to the point of ridiculousness because nobody wants to get in trouble for this and there is no clear guidance provided.”

Austin Kocher, an assistant professor at Syracuse University who tracks federal immigration enforcement, said in an analysis last month that conservative critics’ complaints about the policy being too restrictive were “sensationalistically overblown.”

Rather than too many limits, he said, the new rules leave too much power in the hands of individual agents and officers “to do the right thing.”

“I see no reason or evidence to trust ICE officers to do this,” he wrote.

He pointed out that most ICE arrests now are migrants picked up at prisons and jails in communities that still cooperate with the agency. The protected areas policy won’t affect those.

“I don’t imagine that we’ll see any dramatic shift in immigration enforcement practices as a result of this memo. But that’s an empirical question, and I remain curious to see what the evidence says,” Mr. Kocher wrote.

Rosary refuge

The policy Mr. Mayorkas released contains at least three dozen types of locations that are protected. The FAQ has at least 45 specific areas.

For example, the FAQ puts off-limits “a place where a funeral, graveside ceremony, rosary, wedding, or other religious or civil ceremonies or observances occur.”

The rosary language is particularly concerning to some. Rosaries are prayer beads, and in the Catholic Church the rosary also means the set of prayers said in connection with the beads. Immigration experts struggled to figure out what it means for a rosary to “occur.”

By one interpretation, that could mean anywhere a rosary could be said. Another interpretation might mean anywhere a set of rosary beads exists. Both are likely unknowable for an immigration officer.

“This wasn’t written by serious people,” said Jon Feere, who was chief of staff at ICE in the Trump administration. “The Biden administration either didn’t think through the impact of this policy, or they intended to gut nearly all immigration enforcement nationwide, with the exception of exigent circumstances and hot pursuit, which rarely occur.”

He said Mr. Mayorkas is sending mixed signals. In a previous order, Mr. Mayorkas said being in the country illegally is no longer a sufficient reason for arrest or deportation. There must be another threshold of security threat, serious criminal activity or recent border jumping to justify ICE or the Border Patrol making an arrest.

Mr. Feere said enforcement is now limited to high-value targets, so it makes no sense to tie officers’ hands in going after them.

In a worst-case scenario, a sexual predator could become immune from enforcement near a playground, Mr. Feere said.

“It’s difficult to put into words how horrific this is for public safety and the rule of law,” he told The Times.

School bus stops are considered protected areas, even when no children are present. In the District of Columbia, schoolchildren use the local Metrobus system. Mr. Feere, who is now director of investigations at the Center for Immigration Studies, wondered whether that could make every city bus stop and its surroundings protected areas.

It’s also difficult to see how an officer should define “community-based organization” locations, much less be aware of all of them. One ICE officer wondered whether immigrant rights groups couldn’t set up nonprofit organizations at addresses throughout a community to forge new sanctuary space.

Homeland Security also acknowledged sensitive areas along the Mexican border and said the new enforcement limits apply even there. But the department, in its FAQ, said as long as an agent “personally observed” someone jumping the border, that counts as an exigent circumstance.

Complicating matters, Mr. Mayorkas’ memo and ICE’s FAQ say the no-go lists are just examples and aren’t to be considered exhaustive.

Mr. Mayorkas, in his memo, said there is “no bright-line definition of what constitutes ‘near.’” He said factors include visibility from the protected area and people’s “behavioral patterns” around the location.

“The fundamental question is whether our enforcement action would restrain people from accessing the protected area to receive essential services or engage in essential activities,” Mr. Mayorkas wrote.

Officers said that leaves them guessing. They worry that whatever standards they use, immigrant rights advocates will demand more. For example, The Times used a 500-foot radius, or about half a city block, to

	<p>plot its map of off-limits areas, but officers said advocacy groups might fight for a whole city block, or a 1,000-foot radius.</p> <p>Homeland Security’s FAQ offers the public four ways to complain about agents or officers who violate Mr. Mayorkas’ new policy.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Arrest: espionage charges in FBI operation
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/16/us/former-defense-contractor-arrested-espionage.html
GIST	<p>A former defense contractor from South Dakota was arrested on Wednesday night on espionage-related charges after an undercover F.B.I. operation in which he tried to provide classified national defense information to someone he believed to be a Russian agent, federal prosecutors said.</p> <p>According to a criminal complaint, the man, John Murray Rowe Jr., 63, of Lead, S.D., told someone posing as a Russian agent that Moscow was “the place to be.”</p> <p>Mr. Rowe was charged with attempting to communicate national defense information to aid a foreign government, the Department of Justice said in a statement on Thursday. He is set to make his initial court appearance on Friday in United States District Court in Rapid City, S.D. If convicted, Mr. Rowe could face a maximum sentence of life in prison.</p> <p>Mr. Rowe worked for several defense contractors as a test engineer for nearly 40 years, according to the criminal complaint. His job allowed him to have multiple national security clearances, ranging from “secret” to “top secret,” and his work included matters relating to the U.S. Air Force’s aerospace technology, the Justice Department said.</p> <p>After Mr. Rowe committed several security violations and revealed an interest in Russian affairs, he was identified in April 2017 as a possible insider threat, and his contract with a defense contractor ended in August 2017, according to the complaint.</p> <p>The following month, Mr. Rowe began working for a different defense contractor, which gave him a “secret” national security clearance, according to the complaint.</p> <p>On Feb. 20, 2018, one of Mr. Rowe’s colleagues saw him carry a thumb drive into a classified area, according to the complaint, and when questioned by the colleague, Mr. Rowe said he was trying to install software from the drive onto a computer in the classified area.</p> <p>About a week later, Mr. Rowe asked an information security officer if it was possible to simultaneously hold U.S. and Russian security clearances, according to the complaint. Mr. Rowe was told holding both clearances was not allowed, and he was fired from his job the following month for security violations, according to court documents.</p> <p>It was unclear on Thursday whether Mr. Rowe had a lawyer. Mr. Rowe did not immediately respond to requests for comment by phone and email on Thursday night.</p> <p>Based on his actions, the Federal Bureau of Investigation opened an undercover operation to see if Mr. Rowe was willing to share his knowledge of classified information with a foreign government.</p> <p>In March 2020, Mr. Rowe met with an undercover F.B.I. employee who was posing as a Russian government agent, according to the complaint. After that meeting, Mr. Rowe exchanged more than 300 emails with another undercover F.B.I. employee posing as a Russian agent, the complaint said.</p> <p>The coronavirus “is going be around for a very long time and politically something else is going to happen,” Mr. Rowe said in an email to the undercover F.B.I. employee on April, 30, 2020. “Everyone here is talking about a new world order and I believe this so much that I even been asking my granddaughters to learn the Russian language.”</p>

	<p>In the same email, Mr. Rowe said he was interested in a law President Vladimir Putin of Russia had signed that would allow foreigners to become Russian citizens without giving up their citizenship in their home countries.</p> <p>“This is important to me because I can live on my Social Security that I received here while living in Moscow,” Mr. Rowe said. “I been seeing how much it cost to live there and that the place to be. Once this travel ban is over, I’m going to be heading to Moscow.”</p> <p>In another email, according to the Justice Department statement, Mr. Rowe “disclosed national defense information classified as SECRET that concerned specific operating details of the electronic countermeasure systems used by U.S. military fighter jets.”</p> <p>On July 31, 2020, Mr. Rowe expressed concerns in an email about being detected by the U.S. government, saying he had to be careful whom he talked to.</p> <p>“Get me in stink operation with the FBI, talking in a hotel room about trade secrets,” he wrote, seemingly referring to a sting operation. “Those people are real dirt bags.”</p> <p>Finally, in an email to the undercover F.B.I. employee on Nov. 11, 2020, Mr. Rowe said he had found some classified documents to share with the supposed Russian agent.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Police stun gun a man, he catches fire; dies
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/16/nyregion/man-catskill-police-stun-gun-dies.html
GIST	<p>New York’s attorney general is investigating the death of a 29-year-old man who was badly burned when he was shot with a stun gun after dousing himself with hand sanitizer during an altercation with police officers, officials said on Thursday.</p> <p>The man, Jason Jones of Catskill, N.Y., died on Wednesday at a Syracuse hospital, where he had been in a burn unit since shortly after the confrontation on Oct. 30 in the village’s police station, a lawyer for his family, Kevin A. Luibrand, said in an interview on Thursday.</p> <p>Joseph Stanzione, the Greene County, N.Y., district attorney, opened an inquiry into the episode after it occurred. With Mr. Jones’s death, the attorney general, Letitia James, will take the lead in the investigation, Mr. Stanzione said in an interview on Thursday.</p> <p>“They’ll pick it up at this point,” he said, adding that his office would wait to hear what role, if any, it would play as the investigation proceeds.</p> <p>In a news release, Ms. James confirmed that her office, which was given the authority to investigate killings by the police under a 2015 executive order, would take over the inquiry.</p> <p>Mr. Luibrand welcomed Ms. James’s decision to step in, saying it was “inevitable” once Mr. Jones died.</p> <p>The altercation between Mr. Jones and the Catskill police, first reported last month by The Times Union of Albany, unfolded after a series of events that Mr. Stanzione outlined in the interview.</p> <p>Police officers responded to a call to a bar near the Catskill police station, Mr. Stanzione said. It was unclear, he said, whether Mr. Jones was involved in whatever prompted the call to the police.</p> <p>With officers still at the bar, Mr. Jones “made his way” the roughly 400 feet to the police station, and the confrontation there began at around 1:30 a.m., Mr. Stanzione said. Mr. Jones was not in custody when the incident unfolded, Mr. Stanzione added.</p> <p>At some point, Mr. Jones began to douse himself with hand sanitizer, Mr. Stanzione said.</p>

“For what reason, we don’t know,” he said. “That’s part of the investigation.”

When the officers deployed the stun gun to subdue Mr. Jones, he caught fire, Mr. Luibrand said.

Many hand sanitizers contain ethyl alcohol, which, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “readily evaporates at room temperature into an ignitable vapor and is considered a flammable liquid.” The incidence of fires related to such sanitizers is “very low,” the C.D.C. says, but “it is vital” that they be “stored safely.”

David Darling, the Catskill police chief, did not respond to calls seeking comment on Thursday. He told The Times Union last month that Mr. Jones, a former high school sports standout whom officers knew, appeared intoxicated when he arrived at the police station.

“I think they were afraid he was going to hurt himself, and that’s what started it,” Chief Darling told The Times Union, calling the episode “horrible.”

Mr. Stanzione confirmed on Thursday that video cameras at the police station had captured the episode. Mr. Luibrand said that neither the footage nor any police reports detailing what happened had been provided to him.

“They have shared nothing with us,” he said.

In an investigation of officers’ use of so-called conducted-energy weapons — the best known being the Taser — USA Today and the Arnolt Center for Investigative Journalism at Indiana University found “a pattern of sloppy, reckless and deadly use of the weapon involved in hundreds of deaths and injuries in the past decade.”

Among the deaths detailed in the USA Today report, published in April, was one in 2017 involving a suicidal 39-year-old man in Arlington, Texas, who was shot with a stun gun by officers who had watched him douse himself with gasoline. The electrical currents immediately set the man ablaze and burned down his house, the newspaper reported. He died several days later.

USA Today noted that there are no uniform state or national standards for the use of the weapons, that no federal agency monitors how many deaths or serious injuries occur after their use and that no entity tracks whether law enforcement authorities actually adopt the myriad safety guidelines recommended by manufacturers and police training groups.

Axon Enterprise Inc, which makes the Taser, has said that most deaths involving the weapon are caused by drug use, underlying physiological conditions like heart problems or other types of force that officers use along with the weapon.

Reuters reported in 2019 that the company acknowledges Tasers are “not risk free,” but insists they are “the most safe and effective less-lethal use of force tool available to law enforcement.”

Mr. Stanzione said an autopsy on Mr. Jones was being conducted on Thursday and that the official cause of his death had not yet been determined.

Mr. Luibrand was not waiting for a medical examiner’s ruling.

“The kid was ignited,” he said.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Judge overturns Purdue Pharma settlement
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/16/health/purdue-pharma-opioid-settlement.html

GIST

A federal judge on Thursday evening unraveled a painstakingly negotiated settlement between Purdue Pharma and thousands of state, local and tribal governments that had sued the maker of the prescription painkiller OxyContin for the company's role in the opioid epidemic, saying that the plan was flawed in one critical area.

The judge, Colleen McMahon of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, said that the settlement, part of a restructuring plan for Purdue approved in September by a bankruptcy judge, should not go forward because it releases the company's owners, members of the billionaire Sackler family, from liability in civil opioid-related cases.

Although the Sacklers did not file for personal bankruptcy protection, they had made immunization from opioid claims an absolute requirement in exchange for contributing payments amounting to \$4.5 billion to the agreement.

But the bankruptcy code, Judge McMahon said, does not explicitly permit a judge to grant such releases, which she called "the great unsettled question."

The Sacklers did not respond to requests for comment on Thursday evening.

Lawyers for a small group of states that had appealed the plan immediately hailed the ruling. "This is a seismic victory for justice and accountability that will re-open the deeply flawed Purdue bankruptcy and force the Sackler family to confront the pain and devastation they have caused," said William Tong, the attorney general of Connecticut.

In recent months, members of Congress have proposed legislation called "The Sackler Act" to preclude owners from receiving such protections unless they file for bankruptcy themselves. But even if eventually passed, it is unlikely to become law in sufficient time to resolve the Purdue case.

In her ruling, Judge McMahon all but openly invited the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit to weigh in. Various appellate courts disagree on the matter and, in her meticulous, 142-page assessment, Judge McMahon wrote that "the lower courts desperately need a clear answer."

Within hours of the ruling, Purdue said it would appeal. Judge McMahon's ruling "will delay, and perhaps end, the ability of creditors, communities, and individuals to receive billions in value to abate the opioid crisis," said Steve Miller, chairman of the company's board of directors. "These funds are needed now more than ever as overdose rates hit record-highs, and we are confident that we can successfully appeal this decision and deliver desperately needed funds to the communities and individuals suffering in the midst of this crisis."

The fates of Purdue and the Sacklers have been perhaps the most closely watched among the web of litigation brought against companies in the pharmaceutical industry seeking to hold them accountable for the epidemic of opioid addiction in the United States, which has claimed more than a half-million lives.

Under the crush of thousands of lawsuits, Purdue filed for bankruptcy restructuring in September 2019, which automatically put a hold on all the claims against it.

Nearly two years later, Judge Robert Drain, the bankruptcy court judge in White Plains, N.Y., confirmed a plan that had been approved by a majority of creditors who voted. Purdue would be formally dissolved and would re-emerge as a new company called Kinoa Pharma that would still produce OxyContin but also other drugs. The new company's profits would go to states and communities to fund opioid treatment and prevention efforts.

The Sacklers would renounce their ownership, eventually sell their foreign pharmaceutical companies as well, and contribute \$4.5 billion of their fortune to the state and local opioid abatement funds.

In exchange, all lawsuits against Purdue would be extinguished, a benefit typical of bankruptcy. What made the settlement so contentious was the Sacklers' insistence on being released from all Purdue-related opioid claims, although they had not personally filed for bankruptcy.

In court, lawyers said there are more than 800 lawsuits that name the Sacklers.

After Judge Drain approved the plan, it was immediately appealed by the United States Trustee, a branch of the Justice Department that monitors bankruptcy cases; eight states, including Maryland, Washington and Connecticut; the District of Columbia; and about 2,000 individuals. The appeal was filed in federal district court.

Lawyers challenging the plan argued that the Sacklers had essentially gamed the bankruptcy system. Moreover, they argued, Judge Drain lacked the authority to shut off a state's power to pursue the Sacklers under its own civil consumer protection laws.

"Today's ruling is a critical development that restores the state's ability to protect the safety of Marylanders by holding fully accountable those who created or contributed to the opioid crisis, particularly members of the Sackler family," said Brian E. Frosh, the Maryland attorney general.

During oral arguments, Judge McMahon said she was troubled by what she saw as a red flag: the more than \$10 billion that the Sacklers withdrew from Purdue between 2008 and 2018, as the opioid epidemic was cresting. The Sackler dividends were largely deposited in offshore accounts and trusts that are inaccessible to American authorities.

And notably, she said, the withdrawals escalated after Purdue and three top executives pleaded guilty in 2007 to federal criminal and civil charges related to aggressive marketing of opioids, paying more than \$600 million.

As Judge McMahon wrote: "Concerned about how their personal financial situation might be affected, the family began what one member described as an 'aggressive[]' program of withdrawing money from Purdue almost as soon as the ink was dry on the 2007 papers."

Those withdrawals left the company without deep cash reserves to resolve thousands of opioid lawsuits that, by late 2019, forced Purdue to seek shelter in bankruptcy. But to settle the lawsuits and emerge from bankruptcy, Purdue needed the Sacklers' contribution.

That reliance put the Sacklers in a position to make a line-in-the-sand demand: They would only give the money if they received immunity from all opioid-related cases filed in civil courts.

Purdue and lawyers for creditors who approved the plan had argued that Judge Drain's authority to grant such sweeping immunity was in fact grounded in the bankruptcy code, as well as in precedent from the Second Circuit, under whose jurisdiction the Purdue case falls. Without the Sackler contribution, the lawyers said, Purdue would likely be dissolved, leaving plaintiffs who are in sore need of resources largely uncompensated.

"There is no question that the Sacklers are bad actors," wrote lawyers for an oversight committee of creditors that ultimately supported the settlement plan. But it was the knowledge of those acts, gleaned in a scorched-earth 18-month investigation of the family's finances, they said, that gave the plaintiffs the leverage to extract such a large settlement sum from Purdue's owners.

But lawyers for the U.S. Trustee argued that shutting down the ability of plaintiffs to sue the Sacklers violated the plaintiffs' due process rights. The Sacklers, they argued, should not be rewarded for their contribution because they "created the need for that money" by taking it out of the company in the first place, setting up the situation where they would be protected from lawsuits "by piggybacking on the bankruptcy of their company."

On Thursday night, after the ruling, Attorney General Merrick B. Garland said in a statement, “The bankruptcy court did not have the authority to deprive victims of the opioid crisis of their right to sue the Sackler family.”

In her opinion, Judge McMahon said that the case raised constitutional questions but that she did not need to reach them, having found no authority for a judge to grant immunity to parties who do not seek bankruptcy protection.

The Sackler lawyers argued that the withdrawals had not been done in anticipation of a bankruptcy filing that occurred years later, after family members had stepped down from the Purdue board. Instead, they said, the hefty withdrawals coincided with a decade in which a key patent issue was addressed in Purdue’s favor and the company was flush with cash.

During that same period, Purdue’s sales force continued to fan out across the country. The use and illegal diversion of prescription opioids skyrocketed.

When Purdue filed for bankruptcy, its relationship with its owners became strained — simultaneously cooperative and adversarial. The company relies on the Sacklers to fund settlements. Yet as the debtor, Purdue conducted a forensic accounting of all of its assets, including the billions withdrawn by the Sacklers.

A congressional committee found that the Sacklers are worth about \$11 billion.

While the Purdue Pharma bankruptcy plan — and its disbursements to help prevention and addiction treatment — is on indefinite pause, wending its way through the courts, the opioid epidemic, indifferent to negotiation, persists. Last month, federal data showed that deaths from opioids — fentanyl, heroin and illegally diverted prescription painkillers — only continue to trend upward.

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HEADLINE	12/16 France: 110K fake health passes circulating
SOURCE	https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211216-france-says-110-000-fake-health-passes-in-circulation
GIST	<p>Paris (AFP) – Some 110,000 fake health passes are in circulation in France, the interior ministry said Thursday, with hundreds of investigations launched against makers and users of the forged documents.</p> <p>The health pass, showing proof of vaccination, Covid recovery or a recent negative test result, is required for access to public transport, restaurants and cultural events.</p> <p>As they investigate users and distributors of the fake documents, police have found that medical staff is sometimes complicit in the fraud, said Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin.</p> <p>"The problem with the fake health passes is that they often involve the collusion of real doctors or real nurses," he told the France 2 broadcaster. This makes offences "very difficult to prove".</p> <p>Some 100 people had been arrested as a result of 400 investigations since the health pass became mandatory in parts of public life, Darmanin said.</p> <p>They risk up to five years in prison, he said, adding that some have already been sentenced to suspended or actual jail terms.</p> <p>Last month, a doctor who allegedly sold at least 220 fake health passes in the Paris region was charged and detained.</p> <p>Darmanin said he was in favour of dropping cases against users of fake health passes who agreed to get a real one legally instead.</p>

	<p>The French government has warned that the number of Covid patients in intensive care could reach 4,000 during the Christmas season, compared to 3,000 now.</p> <p>It is promoting booster vaccine shots to control the worst of the onslaught of the Omicron variant, and has warned that health passes will no longer be valid from mid-January unless holders get a vaccine top-up.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Deadly: fentanyl invades more illicit pills
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/fentanyl-invades-more-illicit-pills-with-deadly-consequences-11639650605?mod=hp_lead_pos12
GIST	<p>Zachary Didier took what looked like a prescription pain pill just after Christmas last year, according to his parents. It contained an illicit form of the powerful opioid fentanyl, which they say killed the 17-year-old Californian.</p> <p>His death was one of a record 100,000 fatal overdoses in a year-long period through April that have demonstrated how the nation's illegal drug supply is becoming more toxic and dangerous. A bootleg version of fentanyl being made mainly by Mexican drug cartels is spreading to more corners of the U.S., increasingly inside fake pills taken by people who in some cases believe they are consuming less-potent drugs.</p> <p>"It robs you of any chance to get red flags," said Laura Didier, Zachary's mother. His parents said they didn't know he was using pills recreationally before he died.</p> <p>Other dangerous opioids are also surfacing in the drug supply, researchers say, continuing a long-running cat-and-mouse game as suppliers and users try to stay ahead of law enforcement. Fatal overdoses involving the combination of fentanyl with stimulants like cocaine and methamphetamines are also rising, research shows.</p> <p>Federal authorities say they are encountering more pills passing for medications such as oxycodone that contain fentanyl. By late September, they had seized more than 9.5 million fake pills, many containing fentanyl, a haul higher than in the two prior years combined, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration.</p> <p>"The supply of these pills is going up exponentially," said Joseph Palamar, an associate professor and drug epidemiologist at New York University Langone Health. "They are easy to transport and difficult to track. Pills are the ultimate fake out. You can fake out your parents, your friends, your partner, law enforcement."</p> <p>The mass production of such pills by Mexican cartels has escalated the threat, according to the DEA. Pill-related deaths are particularly common in the western U.S., a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report said Tuesday. Fentanyl appears to be gaining ground there after surfacing mainly in eastern states for years.</p> <p>Fentanyl is made from chemicals, rather than the opium-poppy cultivation required to produce heroin. It can also be 50 times more powerful than heroin.</p> <p>Pills containing fentanyl are often made to look like less-powerful prescription opioids that can be harder to obtain. Fentanyl can also show up in tablets masquerading as other kinds of drugs, like benzodiazepines, a class of sometimes-abused medication used to treat anxiety and other issues. Users with no tolerance to opioids can end up ingesting an extremely powerful dose. Some advocates for those killed consider hidden fentanyl deaths poisonings.</p> <p>Toxicologists and law-enforcement authorities are engaged in an ever-evolving effort to spot, and then outlaw, different synthetic opioids. Several years ago these were often fentanyl analogues that faded</p>

after the DEA put them on its schedule of illegal drugs, toxicologists said. There is a legitimate form of fentanyl sold to treat pain. The illegal market is largely fueled by illicit forms, authorities say.

Another class of powerful opioids known as nitazenes cropped up in recent years, and sometimes show up with fentanyl in toxicology samples from overdose victims. The drugs can be 10 times as potent as fentanyl. Washington, D.C.'s Department of Forensic Sciences recently found two different nitazene drugs while testing residue from needles at local needle-exchange programs. The city this year recorded about 36 opioid overdoses a month through August, compared with 17 a month as recently as 2018.

"There's definitely a case to be made the opioid supply is getting more toxic," said Alex Krotulski, associate director at the nonprofit Center for Forensic Science Research & Education, which maintains a public early-warning system for new synthetic drugs.

Fentanyl was found this fall in marijuana that had been used by a person who survived an overdose in Connecticut. Law enforcement say they are trying to determine whether the mix was user-driven or caused by accidental ingestion.

Dr. Krotulski said accidental cross-contamination between fentanyl and other kinds of drugs is rare. But any encounter with unsuspected fentanyl can be dangerous, said Bryce Pardo, a Rand Corp. researcher who focuses on drug policy.

"Now, if you're a casual consumer, partying on the weekends, it can be the case that someone hands out pills—you overdose and die," he said.

Even knowing fentanyl is present may not protect an experienced user. Illegally made pills may contain unpredictable and poorly mixed amounts of fentanyl. "These are not pharmacists," Dr. Pardo said.

Joshua Arnds, who lived in the Sacramento area, knew he was using illicit pills containing fentanyl but believed he could control the dose, according to his mother, Tawny Arnds. Joshua overdosed several times, including one last December that hospitalized him and led to a debilitating arm injury, despite saying repeatedly he would stop because of the danger, Ms. Arnds said.

"One time, when he had an overdose, he said 'I just miscalculated,'" she recalled.

She believes Joshua struggled with stress and was dogged by brain and spinal injuries that may date to a childhood soccer-field collision. In September, she found Joshua in his room, his body cold; he died from a fentanyl overdose at 19. There was powder and a knife on his desk and pills in his pocket, she said.

When Zachary Didier died suddenly at home in the Sacramento area, investigators said an undetected health issue was possible, his father, Chris Didier, said. They also suggested fentanyl.

"We were baffled, we were confused," Mr. Didier said.

Toxicology confirmed fentanyl in his system, and information on his phone helped show he had purchased pills he believed were legitimate, Placer County, Calif., District Attorney Morgan Gire said. Virgil Xavier Bordner is facing charges including involuntary manslaughter for allegedly selling the drugs. His attorney said he plans to plead not guilty.

Zachary's parents said he paid a terrible price for experimenting with something so risky. "He was one of those kids that encountered something deadly right away," Ms. Didier said.

Three months after he died, college acceptance letters began arriving.

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SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/16/us-begins-returning-dollars-10m-of-antiquities-stolen-in-italy-kim-kardashian
GIST	<p>The US is returning 200 antiquities, including an ancient Roman sculpture that almost ended up in the possession of Kim Kardashian West, that were stolen and smuggled out of Italy.</p> <p>The variety of Roman, Etruscan and Greek artefacts, valued at \$10m (£7.5m), had been looted since at least the early 1980s before being smuggled out and sold to private collectors, museums or auction houses. Half were found at New York's Fordham Museum of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Art as part of an investigation led by the Manhattan district attorney, Cyrus Vance.</p> <p>A white marble head of the Roman emperor Settimio Severo that had been stolen in 1984 from a museum in Italy's southern Campania region was found in June 2020 just as it was about to be put up for auction at Christie's in New York.</p> <p>Other artefacts include a 7th century BC ceramic vessel called Pithos with Ulysses, and a 4th century BC terracotta image of a goddess know as A Head of Maiden.</p> <p>Kardashian unwittingly became caught up in the investigation this year after the US government named her in a civil forfeiture claim for an ancient Roman statue, originally looted from Italy, that was confiscated at Los Angeles port in 2016. The statue, known as the Fragment of Myron's Samian Athena, was bought by the reality TV star from a Belgian art dealer and was part of a shipment in her name that contained 40 antiques. She was not accused of any wrongdoing.</p> <p>The vast majority of the stolen artefacts are believed to be connected to Edoardo Almagià, an Italian antiques dealer who lived in New York until 2003. Almagià was investigated in Italy for smuggling and selling stolen artefacts, but he will not face criminal charges since the statute of limitations for the crime has expired.</p> <p>"He is free and living in Rome," said General Roberto Riccardi, the chief of Italy's cultural heritage protection squad. "Lots of time has passed and so the crime is no longer pursuable."</p> <p>Almagià was investigated for decades by Italy and the US, with Italian authorities alleging his business contributed to "one of the biggest lootings of Italian cultural heritage". According to the news channel TGCom24, he has defended himself, saying: "There are thousands if art objects travelling the world without documents and in the past it was always like this," adding that "only now have the Italian and American regulations become stricter". Almagià said the money spent on the investigation could have been spent "repairing Italian museums rather than on persecuting traders".</p> <p>One hundred and sixty of the artefacts will travel back to Rome on Thursday with Riccardi, while 40 others will go on display in an exhibition at the Italian consulate in New York until March.</p> <p>Italy's cultural heritage protection squad was established in 1969 and has since retrieved more than 3m stolen artefacts. The team recently recovered more than 2,000 relics looted from Taranto, in Puglia, which ended up in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland.</p> <p>"The thefts create incalculable damage to our heritage and culture," said Riccardi. "Firstly, a community loses an object of its heritage. Secondly, a whole mine of information for archaeologists disappears when an artefact is removed from its context."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Ohio police: thieves stole entire bridge
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/16/ohio-police-ask-for-help-finding-thieves-who-stole-entire-bridge
GIST	Police in Akron, Ohio, are hunting brazen thieves who have stolen an entire 58ft-long bridge.

	<p>The pedestrian bridge used to span the Cuyahoga River in a park in the city, but had been removed as part of a wetlands restoration project and stored in a nearby field.</p> <p>Unfortunately, while there, it caught the eye of someone who first stole its deck boards and then came back for the entire rest of the structure, leaving police baffled as to why anyone would steal an entire bridge – and what they would do with it.</p> <p>“It could be used for a variety of different things to include as simple as landscaping or they could use it for some other engineering project, some other large scale project,” police officer Lt Mike Miller told a local TV station.</p> <p>Police have appealed to the local community for help.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Haiti: 12 remaining hostages released
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/16/world/americas/haiti-hostages-released.html
GIST	<p>The 12 remaining members of a group of 17 missionaries from a U.S. charity who had been kidnapped in Haiti two months ago have been released, the Haitian national police said Thursday.</p> <p>A spokesman for the police confirmed the release but could not provide further details. It was not immediately clear whether a ransom had been paid, or the physical conditions of the hostages.</p> <p>The abduction underscores the power of criminal gangs in Haiti as it grapples with a litany of natural and man-made disasters.</p> <p>Five of the hostages, from a U.S. group called Christian Aid Ministries, had been released already, and the others were found by local residents in an outlying area of Port-au-Prince, the capital, on Thursday, local media reports said.</p> <p>The group had included 16 Americans and one Canadian. They were taken in October by a gang called 400 Mawozo in a neighborhood of Port-au-Prince.</p> <p>Sections of the city have fallen under gang control as Haiti slid into a growing political and economic crisis that followed the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, in July.</p> <p>Kidnapping has become an increasingly common practice for Haitian gangs, who have targeted even students going to school and pastors delivering sermons.</p> <p>The 400 Mawozo gang is well-known for orchestrating mass kidnappings, They had initially demanded a ransom of \$1 million per person, but the sum was widely viewed as a starting point for negotiations.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/16 Fentanyl ODs no. 1 cause of death in adults
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/us/fentanyl-overdoses-leading-cause-death-adults
GIST	<p>Fentanyl overdoses have surged to the leading cause of death for adults between the ages of 18 and 45, according to an analysis of U.S. government data.</p> <p>Between 2020 and 2021, nearly 79,000 people between 18 and 45 years old — 37,208 in 2020 and 41,587 in 2021 — died of fentanyl overdoses, the data analysis from opioid awareness organization Families Against Fentanyl shows.</p> <p>Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that can be deadly even in very small amounts, and other drugs, including heroin, meth and marijuana, can be laced with the dangerous drug. Mexico and China are the primary sources for the flow of fentanyl into the United States, according to the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA).</p>

Comparatively, between Jan. 1, 2020, and Dec. 15, 2021, there were more than 53,000 COVID-19 deaths among those between the ages of 18 and 49, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"This is a national emergency. America's young adults — thousands of unsuspecting Americans — are being poisoned," James Rauh, founder of Families Against Fentanyl, said in a statement. "It is widely known that illicit fentanyl is driving the massive spike in drug-related deaths. A new approach to this catastrophe is needed."

Rauh, who lost his son to an overdose, added that "declaring illicit fentanyl a Weapon of Mass Destruction would activate additional and necessary federal resources to root out the international manufacturers and traffickers of illicit fentanyl and save American lives."

The DEA on Thursday announced a surge in the sale of fake prescription pills containing deadly opioids on social media platforms like Snapchat.

[Experts believe](#) there is a correlation between the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and the recent increase in fentanyl overdoses.

More adults between 18 and 45 died of fentanyl overdoses in 2020 than any other leading cause of death, including COVID-19, motor vehicle accidents, cancer and suicide. Fentanyl also killed more Americans in general in 2020 than car accidents, gun violence, breast cancer and suicide, according to the analysis of CDC data from Families Against Fentanyl.

Fentanyl deaths doubled from 32,754 fatalities to 64,178 fatalities in two years between April 2019 and April 2021.

In the first five months of 2021 alone, more than 42,600 fentanyl overdose deaths were reported, which represents an increase of more than 1,000 fentanyl deaths per month compared to the same time period in 2020.

"Fentanyl has been found in all the drug supply. That's why anyone using drugs, not just opioids, should carry naloxone," Dr. Roneet Lev, emergency physician and former chief medical officer of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), said in a statement. "The only safe place to obtain drugs is the pharmacy."

Overall drug overdose deaths are expected to surpass 100,000 in 2021, according to preliminary CDC data, representing a 28% increase between April 2020 and April 2021.

President Biden on Wednesday issued an executive order authorizing sanctions against any foreigner engaged in illicit drug trafficking or production.

"I find that international drug trafficking — including the illicit production, global sale and widespread distribution of illegal drugs, the rise of extremely potent drugs such as fentanyl and other synthetic opioids, as well as the growing role of internet-based drug sales — constitutes an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy and economy of the United States," Biden's order states.

Fentanyl drug seizures at the border have reached record highs in 2021, according to [data](#) from Customs and Border Protection (CBP), as the Biden administration faces a continuing crisis at the southern border.

Border authorities have seized more than [11,000 pounds](#) of fentanyl so far in fiscal year 2021, with less than one month to go, dwarfing the 4,776 pounds seized in fiscal 2020. CBP seizures of other drugs, including marijuana, cocaine and heroin have generally decreased since 2018.

	Experts recommend people who use any kind of drug carry Narcan, a lifesaving medicine also known as naloxone, which has the ability to reverse symptoms of an overdose and potentially save lives, according to Family First Intervention .
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HEADLINE	12/16 Oregon awash in illegal pot farms
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/awash-illegal-pot-farms-oregon-plans-millions-relief-81796231
GIST	<p>SALEM, Ore. -- Theft of water during a drought. Exploitation of immigrant laborers. Intimidation of residents by armed criminals.</p> <p>A Democratic state senator from southern Oregon said his region, awash in illegal marijuana farms that are protected by gunmen, is starting to look more like a failed state.</p> <p>After hearing him and others testify this week, the Oregon Legislature dedicated \$25 million to help police, sheriff's offices and community organizations pay for the ballooning costs of cracking down on the thousands of industrial-scale, illegal pot farms. Residents said the assistance is welcome but not enough.</p> <p>Seven years after Oregon voters passed a ballot measure legalizing the recreational use of marijuana and its regulated cultivation and sale, the state is grappling with an explosion of illegal marijuana farms that have brazenly cropped up, primarily in Josephine and Jackson counties in the south.</p> <p>Hoop houses — cheaply built greenhouses — have been erected along highways and within city limits, with many growers claiming to be legal hemp farmers but cultivating plants with illegal amounts of THC, the component that creates the “high.”</p> <p>The illicit industry is generating billions of dollars in profits and is financed by well-heeled foreign criminal gangs and drug cartels, law enforcement officials said.</p> <p>Jackson County Sheriff Nathan Sickler told lawmakers the cartels “have a business model: Put up more cannabis illegal grows than law enforcement can ever get. They know we’re going to get some, but they know we can’t get it all.”</p> <p>A farmer in southern Oregon — who used a creek for irrigating his crops before it ran dry because an illegal pot farm siphoned off the water, all while the West deals with a climate-change-fueled drought — blames the state for not having enough inspectors to determine which cannabis farms claiming to be hemp really are growing hemp. He spoke on condition he not be identified because he worries the cartels could retaliate against him.</p> <p>The farmer also blames landowners for selling or leasing property to bad actors.</p> <p>“If somebody walks onto your property with a suitcase with \$100,000 in \$20 bills, you kind of know they're not on the up and up. And if you take that money and allow them to do something on your land, you should probably anticipate that they’re there to break the law,” he said.</p> <p>Sen. Jeff Golden, a Democrat from the southern town of Ashland, said some rural areas are “military-weapons zones, like the ones we usually associate with failed states.”</p> <p>“Illegal cannabis operations in southern Oregon have been using our limited water supply, abusing local workers, threatening neighbors and negatively impacting businesses run by legal marijuana growers,” said Golden, who pushed to get the measure and related funding on the agenda for the one-day special session.</p> <p>Golden and two other lawmakers from southern Oregon, Rep. Pam Marsh, D-Ashland, and Rep. Lily Morgan, R-Grants Pass, previously said in a letter to Gov. Kate Brown that workers on the illegal farms are subjected to “conditions approaching slavery.”</p> <p>Some are also being deprived of their promised wages.</p>

A 27-year-old Argentinian man said in an interview Wednesday that he learned last August through a WhatsApp message group that workers were needed on a pot farm in southern Oregon. At the time, he was working on a pot farm in Humboldt County, California. He then went to the location near Cave Junction, Oregon, expecting to be paid \$2,500 for three weeks of work.

He did 12-hour shifts under the hot sun tending the plants and slept in a tent. When three weeks were up, he and other workers went to the farm manager to get paid.

“He didn't even look at us. He got in his pickup truck and left,” the worker, who is in the U.S. on a tourist visa, said. He spoke on condition he not be named because of federal immigration laws.

When he called the manager, there was no answer. Another worker went to the farm for the wages but had a gun aimed at him.

“The truth is, I'm very disappointed and I don't understand why they were that way with me when I was respectful and I worked all the hours they asked of me,” the man said over the phone from Florida, where he was trying to find temporary work before flying home for Christmas.

The bill passed by the Legislature Monday and signed by the governor on Tuesday establishes the “Illegal Marijuana Market Enforcement Grant Program” to assist cities and counties with costs incurred by local law enforcement in addressing illegal pot farms. It will be administered by the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission.

“It will help,” said Josephine County Sheriff Dave Daniel. “But the issue is metastasizing statewide.”

Sheriff's offices and other law enforcement that apply for the grants will have to work with community-based organizations to deal with the labor trafficking, said Morgan, the lawmaker. Of the \$25 million, \$5 million is dedicated to enforcing water rights.

Several bills coming in the 2022 legislative session will address further needs, she said.

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HEADLINE	12/16 Osaka: arson probe; 20 dead building fire
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/report-27-people-feared-dead-building-fire-osaka-81805111
GIST	<p>TOKYO -- More than 20 people were feared dead after a fire broke out Friday in a building in Osaka in western Japan, fire department officials said, and police were investigating arson as a possible cause.</p> <p>The fire started on the fourth floor of an eight-story building in the shopping and entertainment area of Kitashinchi, Osaka city fire department official Akira Kishimoto said.</p> <p>Twenty-seven people were found in a state of cardiac arrest and one other woman was injured, Kishimoto said. The woman was conscious and brought down by an aerial ladder from a window and was being treated in a hospital.</p> <p>All of the victims were taken to nearby hospitals. Five people have been pronounced dead and three others were resuscitated, NHK national television and other media reported, but Japanese authorities declined to confirm those reports.</p> <p>Osaka Governor Hirofumi Yoshimura offered condolences to those who died in the fire.</p> <p>“I'm praying so that as many lives as possible can be saved,” he said.</p> <p>The building houses an internal medicine clinic, an English language school and other businesses. Many of the victims are believed to be visitors at the clinic on the fourth floor, fire department officials said.</p>

Yoshimura said he instructed other hospitals and mental health clinics to provide consultations for about 600 people who were receiving treatment at the damaged clinic.

The cause of the fire and other details were not immediately known. Osaka police said they were investigating to determine whether the fire was caused by arson or an accident.

Media reports said police were searching for a man who witnesses saw carrying a paper bag from which an unidentified liquid was dripping, but police declined to confirm those reports.

People on other floors of the building were believed to have been safely evacuated, Kishimoto said.

NHK footage showed dozens of fire engines and police vehicles on the street near the building, with onlookers watching the development from across the street.

NHK quoted a witness saying she heard a woman's voice coming from the fourth floor calling for help. Another witness told TV Asahi he saw flames and smoke coming out of windows on the fourth floor of the building when he stepped outside after hearing a commotion.

Another bystander told TBS television that a number of people taken out of the building were covered with blue tarps and seemed lifeless. He said he saw one woman who was alive being rescued through a window.

In total, 70 fire engines were mobilized to fight the fire, which was mostly extinguished within about 30 minutes of an emergency call, officials said.

In a 2019 arson at the Kyoto Animation studio, an attacker stormed into the building and set it on fire, killing 36 people and injuring more than 30 others. The incident shocked Japan and drew an outpouring of grief from anime fans worldwide. In 2001, an intentionally set blaze in Tokyo's Kabukicho entertainment district killed 44 people — the country's worst known case of arson in modern times.

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